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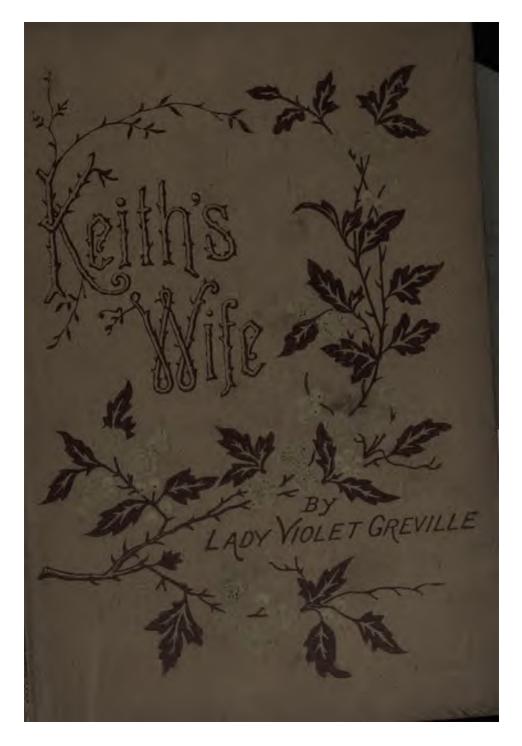
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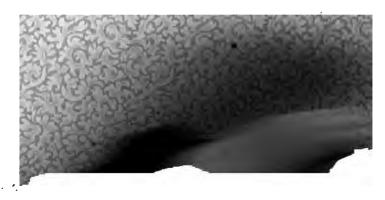
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KEITH'S WIFE.

A Robel.

BY

LADY VIOLET GREVILLE,

AUTHOR OF "ZOE," "FAITHS AND FASHIONS," ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES. VOL. I.



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T.o

MY SISTER-IN-LAW,

THE DUCHESS OF MONTROSE,

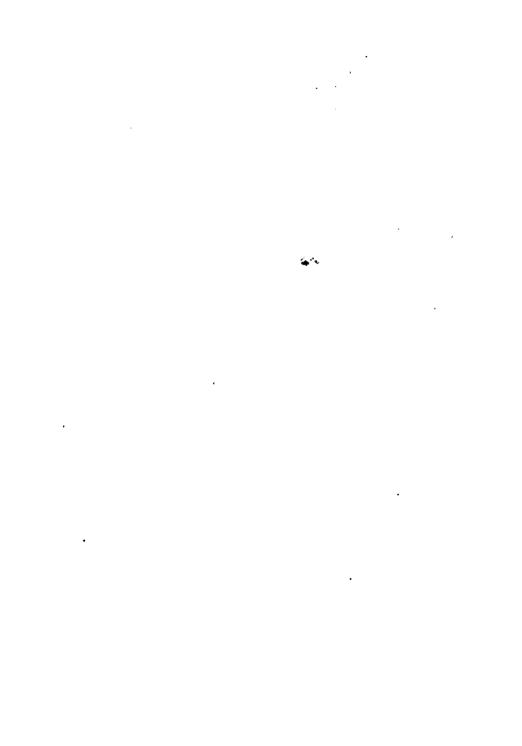
AS A SINCERE AND LOVING TRIBUTE

TO

NOBLE QUALITIES AND GENTLE SYMPATHY,

THESE VOLUMES

Are Enscribed.





CONTENTS OF VOL. I.

CHAPTER							PAGI
I.	DRONING	ron goss	IP -	-	-	-	1
II.	AT THE A	NGEL HO	USE	•	-	-	14
III.	NEW ARE	RIVALS	-	-	-	-	29
IV.	AT BLACE	NESS PA	RK	-	-	-	44
v.	VISITORS	•	-	-	-	-	61
VI.	A LUNCH	EON PART	Y -	-	-	-	82
VII.	IDLE TAL	к -	-	•	-	-	96
VIII.	IN THE P	ARSONAG	Е -	· -	-	-	110
IX.	MRS. MAY	NARD SP	EAKS I	HER MIN	ND -	-	124
X.	KEITH SP	EAKS	-	-	-	-	138
XI.	RAPHAEL	PALIS AI	PPEARS	ON TH	E SCENE	-	151
XII.	LOVERS	-	-	-	-	-	164
XIII.	A DRONIN	IGTON CO	MMITTE	EE -	-	-	177
xIV.	MRS. PAR	KINSON I	OOES H	ER DUT	Y -	-	197

XXII. THE WEDDING DAY -

				·
CHAPTER				PAGE
XV.	MR. MAYNARD DOES HIS D	UTY	-	- 214
XVL	A GIRL'S RESOLUTION	. -	-	- 234
xvII.	ORDEAL BY TALK -	-	-	- 247
xviii.	AN UNEXPECTED MEETING	-	•	- 261
XIX.	AN ANONYMOUS LETTER	•	-	- 275
XX.	MR. MAYNARD EXHORTS	-	•	- 289
XXI.	MARRIAGE SETTLEMENTS	-	•	- 306

- 321





KEITH'S WIFE.

CHAPTER I.

DRONINGTON GOSSIP.

ON'T you come in?' Mrs. Parkinson, speaking thus, leant over the low gate that gave admittance into the pretty, though diminutive, grounds of Ivy Cottage. Her friend, Sophie Maynard, hesitated a little; then reluctantly said:

'I am afraid I cannot. Mr. Maynard will be expecting me; he has a Bible-class at five o'clock, and the days are still short. I must go home.'

'It is a pity.' Mrs. Parkinson smiled; and her smile was very sweet and attractive, though she affected the dress of an old woman, and

VOL. I.

persistently muffled up her head in folds of black lace tied under her chin. She had a youthful smile—a smile that told of hope and faith and enthusiasm, and lit up the small delicate features with a gleam of early beauty. 'Mrs. Strait has promised to come in to tea.'

'I am really very sorry.' Mrs. Maynard stepped a little closer. 'Did she tell you anything about Dorothy? I hear the last new fad is a Cambridge examination. So unfeminine, I think, for a woman to be a "blue-stocking;" and I am sure, if Dorothy did her duty, she might find plenty of occupation at home. But I suppose she has inherited her love of books from her father, who called himself a literary man, though I never heard he did more than "write for magazines."

'I don't think Dorothy is ever idle,' said Mrs. Parkinson, ignoring the implied sarcasm. 'She made poor old widow Macarthy a complete outfit the other day—gown, petticoat, shawl, stockings—and everything worked with her own hands!'

'Oh, she is clever enough, I don't deny!' said Mrs. Maynard pettishly; 'but I cannot think clever women make their homes happy.'

'Dorothy does, I verily believe,' said Mrs. Parkinson quietly; 'she is a model daughter.'

- 'Model!—model! I don't know what you call a "model" daughter. Dorothy does not marry; she dresses in a quaint sort of fashion—that, I suppose, she would call æsthetic—and snubs all the young men of the neighbourhood. That poor young Wigram, for instance, as nice a boy as ever lived, and heir to a large fortune. Well, what was the result? He has gone to London to become a doctor—a loathsome, nasty profession—while Dorothy remains at home, a burden still to her mother; for we all know that a widow's fortune is not, as a rule, much of a pittance.'
- 'Well, if you take it in that way, I have nothing to say; but I am sure Mrs. Strait does not want her to marry—at least, not for the sake of getting rid of her; besides, she is only nineteen or twenty!'
- 'I believe the Straits' family have good blood in their veins,' said Mrs. Maynard reflectively (her own ancestors were wrapped in pleasing mystery); 'and of course they would not think every man eligible; but no one could say a word against young Wigram. His father is a magistrate, and Chard Park is a magnificent place.'
- 'What a match-maker you are!' said Mrs. Parkinson, with a little laugh.

Mrs. Maynard coloured. 'I am sure I do not care a bit whether Dorothy marries or not.'

'No, my dear,' Mrs. Parkinson added gravely, 'don't be a match-maker. My belief is that all marriages are unhappy; or if, by chance, two people suit one another, one of them is sure to die. Almost in every case brought to my notice by the Society for the Prevention of Poverty, the cause of the whole misery is the misconduct of one or other amongst married couples. I have a whole list at home. First, young wife, deserted, with baby, while the husband ran away to sea; second, husband broken-hearted, because his wife tired of him and eloped with her cousin—children fallen into poverty because—'

'My dear Mrs. Parkinson, pray stop. If you only knew how sick I am of the sound of "charity" and the words "deserving cases"! Next to the early services, I think the deserving cases give me the most annoyance. You, of course, are an enthusiast. You like dirty little children, and distressing stories, and misery, and poverty——'

'I don't like these things,' said Mrs. Parkinson, with as near an approach to a sneer as her kindly nature permitted; 'but if they.

exist, surely it is a distinct duty not to shut our eyes to the fact.'

'That is very well for rich people, who naturally ought to give money; but I am not rich (what clergyman's wife ever was?), and I think it is very hard I should have disagreeable things dinned into my ears all day—things which spoil my digestion and looks, and make me wake up with a start in the middle of the night at the very moment when one ought to be sound asleep. I suppose you have a whole heap of new protégés by this time?'

'Yes, indeed—a black man; a very interesting case!' said Mrs. Parkinson eagerly, quite forgetting for the moment that her listener had no sympathy with her enthusiasms. 'He is a native prince, and in such distress, he has been compelled to sweep a crossing; and an American, too—a steady young man.'

'Well, Mrs. Parkinson, I must go,' said her friend hastily, fearing to encounter a deluge of facts, all increasingly harrowing in their details. 'I have stayed talking an unconscionable time, and now I really must make haste, or Mr. Maynard will scold. Clergymen even can scold, you know,' she added, with a smile and a toss of her head, as she turned quickly away.

Mrs. Parkinson remained for a minute looking after her, at her neat little figure and trim clothes, and the wayward turn of her head. Her eyes were the prettiest feature of Sophie Maynard's face; they were large, pathetic, and of a deep brown colour. Though a clergyman's wife, she made great capital of those eyes, which pleaded, urged, reproached, and coaxed, according to their owner's mood. 'Sweet little Sophie Maynard,' people termed her; but Mrs. Parkinson, who saw a little farther than most of her neighbours, and had made a study of psychological subjects, shook her head and said, 'Poor Mr. Maynard!'-only to herself, however, for Mrs. Parkinson was a charitable woman; not only charitable in the accepted sense of alms-giving, but also in that rarer reading, 'thinketh no evil.' quently, Mrs. Parkinson, during the exercise of her impulsive kind-heartedness in a rough and unsentimental world, frequently got imposed upon, and also frequently played the part of a cat's-paw. On such occasions she would only smile incredulously, remarking, 'Well, it can't be helped; the money has done somebody good.' Whether the somebody was the person she had intended to benefit, or another who had profited illegitimately by her benevolence, disturbed her placid nature but slightly.

As she thus mused, leaning over her shabby brown gate, and following Mrs. Maynard's light and elastic step with her kind blue eyes, she murmured gently:

'Poor Sophie! I hope your little heartless ways are all make-believe. I think they are all make-believe.'

And then, with a sigh, she watched the red glow of the sunset sky, and the mist rising from the valley and shrouding the trunks of the trees in vapoury garments, till, suddenly remembering Mrs. Strait's promised visit and the necessity for ordering tea, she slowly retired into the cottage. She had some time to wait for her guest, however. Mrs. Strait came late, and consequently she stayed late. Her life was compounded of a perpetual struggle to overtake time—the time which she heedlessly wasted, and the loss of which she bitterly lamented. Being always late, she was consequently always in a hurry. Her bonnetstrings were invariably untied, her gloves hastily thrust on, and her cloak pinned awry. She had scarcely recovered from the breathless state of haste in which she arrived, before the time approached for her departure; but good

Mrs. Parkinson, who hated to see her friends uncomfortable, craftily eluded her inquiries as to the exact time (the clock on the mantel-piece, a French ormolu gem, never having been known to go), and prevailed upon her to eat her tea-cake in peace, and to refrain from scalding herself in frantic endeavours to swallow the hot tea rapidly.

Mrs. Strait was, however, so accustomed to a perpetual condition of nervous tremor, that she scarcely appreciated the luxury of blissful beatitude, seated thus by the fire, where the large tortoise-shell cat blinked lazily with her eyes at the imperturbable black one opposite, whose fur was as silky as a child's soft curls.

Mrs. Strait's conversation was of a peculiarly disjointed character, her ideas being seemingly propelled in rapid jerks. Most of her friends consequently pronounced her a fatiguing companion; but human nature under all its aspects especially interested Mrs. Parkinson, and she could listen by the hour to little dribbles of small-talk, which would have wearied a less large-hearted woman.

'Yes, it's quite true. Dorothy has got the papers, and she is bent on passing the examination. How good this tea-cake is! Do

you bake with German yeast? Margaret's cakes are never light; I don't know why. But there, I ought to be going; life is so short.'

The good lady hastily collected her gloves and umbrella, carelessly dropping the piece of tea-cake she had been eating on the floor. The black cat opened its eyes, looked at the tempting morsel, stretched itself, finally thought better of the effort, and curled itself up again to sleep. Mrs. Parkinson's cats shared their mistress's food, and consequently displayed a noble indifference to eating, when this entailed the smallest exertion.

- 'Where is Margaret?' asked Mrs. Parkinson, having again persuaded her guest to sit down for a further brief chat.
- 'Margaret? Ah, who would have daughters! One gets no sympathy, but only endures constant anxiety—dear, dear! I remember now Margaret told me particularly to meet her at the dressmaker's. You know that little lame Miss Clack? I cannot imagine how she can have any taste, always confined to the house as she is, and never seeing anything or anybody; but there—Margaret is so inconsiderate. It is past six, and quite dark. She must have gone by this time. Dear, dear!

how do some people manage to accomplish everything?

'Eliza shall walk home with you,' said Mrs. Parkinson encouragingly. 'It is too dark for you to go by yourself.' She laid her hand on the bell, and, in obedience to the summons, an elderly pleasant-faced woman appeared. 'Put on your bonnet, Eliza, and go home with Mrs. Strait.'

After some apologies and excuses, Mrs. Strait consented to avail herself of the maid's escort, and the two set out home.

'It ain't very far to the Angel House, is it?' said Eliza, who was garrulous, and glad of an excuse for a walk; 'but it's that dark at night often, you cannot see your own nose, let alone anyone else's, if so be as you bumped up agin them. The boys here have a fine time of it; they was letting off squibs the other night, and the fire crackling like anything."

Mrs. Strait shuddered. She dreaded noise, and sudden surprises, and disagreeable starts.

'Oh, I hope they won't do that to-night!' she said quickly.

'No fear, ma'am. At one time,' Eliza continued, triumphant in the glory of possessing an interested listener, 'the boys was worse; then they would lay down in the road for

passers-by to trip over. Poor Miss Patten sprained her ankle badly that way.'

'Oh, how can they allow it,' said Mrs. Strait, nervously putting her foot down, as though expecting to step on the prostrate body of a naughty boy. 'What is Mr. Maynard about, and the schoolmaster—why don't they interfere?'

'Bless you! Mr. Maynard, he's too kind-hearted; he would only preach them a sermon on forgiveness, and they don't mind that. What's the use of talking to boys about forgiveness? It's a good birching they want; and they'd get it too if I had to make the laws instead of them soft kind of parsons. Parsons never can keep order, not even amongst theirselves.'

'Fortunately here we are!' exclaimed Mrs. Strait, in a tone of thankfulness, as they neared the cross-roads, in which stood the Angel House; 'and I'm much obliged to you, Eliza. I don't believe I should have got home without you.'

'And the lantern, ma'am,' put in Eliza, flourishing the little lantern with which she had guided Mrs. Strait's steps. 'I always think of that text when I go out at night, "Like a lantern on a hill." I wonder if the

Jews had ugly roads and mischievous boys, too!'

- 'Good-night, Eliza; and thank you very much.'
- 'Good-night, ma'am; and you're mighty welcome to the trouble.'

Wherewith Eliza turned on her heel, and Mrs. Strait breathlessly slipped inside her own door.

'Mamma, so late!'

A tall figure, on which the lamplight fell in golden streams, stood waiting in the hall.

- 'I thought you were never coming home, and you quite forgot about the dressmaker.'
- 'I am very sorry, my dear.' Mrs. Strait was struggling to divest herself of her wraps. 'But the fact was, I really had not time. I was detained in the village by old Bridget, and when I arrived at Mrs. Parkinson's I was very late, and she would not let me go. And so——'

'Oh yes, mamma,' said the tall girl, somewhat scornfully; 'I quite understand.'

At that instant an inner door opened softly, and a voice said:

'Do come in, dear mamma; you must be so tired.'

The voice had a calm and gentle sound,

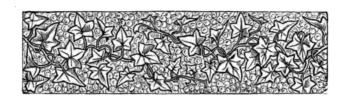
and fell like welcome balm on Mrs. Strait's irritated nerves.

'Yes, Dorothy, I am tired. If I could only get rid of these wraps, I should enjoy a rest.'

Then a white hand was silently put forth, which drew Mrs. Strait, still murmuring, into the warm room.

'So like Dorothy!' the other girl exclaimed, shrugging her shoulders; 'as if dirty boots were the correct thing in a drawing-room. But then, of course, she *never* thinks of appearances.'





CHAPTER II.

AT THE ANGEL HOUSE.

HE Angel House stood at the end of

the village, at the angle whence two cross-roads branched out from the main highway. It was encompassed by an old brick wall, made ruddy by many-coloured lichens, and mellow with the gracious marks of reverent time. At eventide the gabled windows and latticed panes caught the rays of the setting sun, and twinkled like diamonds to welcome the approaching wayfarer. Those old latticed windows dated from the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and stood in their antique strength and simplicity, defying the force of the elements and the decay of years.

The entrance was on the other side of the

house, through an old twisted iron gate and up a narrow path. To the left of the door stretched a small smooth-shaven lawn, to the right a primly set-out garden, where grew in their season such homely plants as southernwood, sunflowers, roses, bushes of lavender. sleepy daffodils, and gay chrysanthemums. Everything in it was simple, full of a dainty old-fashionedness, wherein nothing was for show, but everything for use or delight, possibly a trifle stiff and formal in taste, yet withal graceful and quaint. Within the house, you passed out of the low wainscoted hall into a good-sized dining-room, panelled with oak, but, according to the barbarous fashion of the last generation, painted over in a light-grey colour, and hung with primitive hunting pictures, and prints from Hogarth. One window of the dining-room looked on to the high-road, and the other two on to the green sward. Passing out again into the hall, and through the door to the left you came into the drawingroom; a long, low apartment, equally panelled, and painted of a pale-green tint, a colour which imparted a sensation of most delicious coolness on a sultry summer's afternoon; whereas, in the winter, the flames from the logs in the deep wide chimney, with mantel

of white stone reaching almost to the ceiling, threw a homely and cheerful light around.

The delicate tracery of the skilfully carved doors, window-seats, and cornices, picked out, as well as the wainscot, in the purest white; the low ottomans, shrouded in faded green chintzes; the bowls of fragrant pot-pourri scenting the air with an intangible and delicious odour-gave an idea of refinement and delicacy to the apartment which reminded you of the pale petals of a white rose set in its frame of verdant leaves. The room was unlike any other, and seemed to possess a distinctive individuality — an individuality entirely removed from the marvels of silk and upholstery which compose the furniture of modern houses, and convey an impression of oppressive luxury, rather than of cosy comfort.

Mrs. Strait's chair was habitually drawn near the fire, for spring is a chilly season in England, and beside it was a table, on which stood her knitting and a small duplex lamp, the clear mellow rays of which fell partly on the thin and fatigued features of the elderly woman, partly on the striking and brilliant complexion of her daughter Margaret. The latter was very tall; she carried herself proudly, and knew well the value of her rich

dark hair, red lips, and sparkling eyes. On the hearthrug, gently combing out the locks of a small and fluffy white dog, knelt Dorothy, Mrs. Strait's second daughter. A painter would have loved to feast his eyes upon her face; yet, though fitting excellently into an æsthetic picture, there was nothing sickly or angular about the girl. From the proud open brow, clear as marble, shone large serious eyes, violet, grey, or blue, according to her mood; on each side of the brow, gold-coloured hair, without a tinge of auburn or copper, or of any such crude tints, fell softly in rippling waves, framing the somewhat wide oval of the face, till it was gathered in a thick knot behind the ear; a few rebellious hairs, boasting a wayward curl, nestled over the forehead, but the distinct narrow parting dispelled all notion of a fringe. Her mouth was rather large, intensely flexible, and curved at the extreme edge like that of a Greek statue; the nose was straight and firm, the neck massive and finely-shaped. She was of medium height and slim, moving with a quiet undulating motion that induced you to think of the rippling of the sea or the swaying rustle of a cornfield. In fact, the predominating atmosphere of Dorothy, the way she impressed you,

and the feeling you carried away soothingly after some hours of her conversation, was certainly calm—not the indifferent calm of a soulless being, but rather such calm as is conveyed to the mind in the divine voiceless hush of a cathedral at the supreme moment of the canon of the mass, in the quiet glow of summer afternoon among the hills, or the moon rays in the still and solitary churchyard. It seemed the calm of contentment, of a heart at peace and at one with itself. Her bending figure in the straight - falling grey drapery was instinct And yet with lines of exquisite grace. Dorothy had received no dancing lessons, had never been taught to walk or to courtesy, or to enter a room—she was simplicity itself.

Margaret spoke at that instant, in a quick, decided tone—the tone she affected as being the most fashionable—and Dorothy turned her head to listen, holding the small black comb in one hand and the little white dog named Snow with the other.

'I am sorry, mamma, you did not come to Miss Clack's. She had some lovely new patterns from Paris. It seems they wear small crinolines now, and the dresses full. How will you like that, Dorothy—you, with your ridiculous love for straight folds?'

- 'I shall not like it at all,' answered her sister, resuming the occupation of combing; 'folds are the most beautiful things in the world, and full of character.'
- 'I heard the other day,' mused Margaret, 'that half Mdlle. Rachel, the great actress's success was due to the plain fact that she studied every fold of her drapery artistically, even to the details of a pocket-handkerchief, before appearing on the stage. Ah, mamma,' she added quickly, 'how I should like to go to a play! It is so dull here; never anything more lively than an amateur concert, at which people are too shy to sing in tune. Wouldn't you like to go to London, Dorothy?'
- 'I am not sure. I think I should dislike all the noise and bustle.'
- 'Nonsense! You would soon get accustomed to that. Mamma, when did you say you lived in London?'
- 'When I was a girl. Of course, that is long ago. When I married, we came to live here.'
- 'And here my father wrote and worked, and died. Well, you certainly led a quiet life.'
- 'It was a very happy one,' said Mrs. Strait, with a sigh. 'Your father used to say the quiet of this place was like heaven, and that the very name of the house reminded him

of it; he always wished to call one of the children Angela, but I would not allow it.'

'It is very dull, though,' yawned Margaret, stretching out her foot and lazily contemplating the rosette on her shoe. 'Oh, I forgot! there is a chance of something a little more lively happening. We shall be able to feast our eyes on a young man, which we have not been able to do for a long time—not since young Wigram went away.'

Here she looked towards her sister reproachfully. Dorothy coloured slightly, and drooped her eyes.

'Who is the young man?' asked Mrs. Strait, with an air of indifference.

'The lord of the manor, Keith Chester. He and a friend are coming down to stay for a time at Blackness Park.'

'Keith Chester!' repeated Dorothy, with a puzzled look.

'Ah, you are too young to remember,' resumed Margaret, with importance. 'You were a child when he lived here; and then he went away suddenly, and has been a diplomat or something, and now he has come back. I hope he will stay a long time. They say he is handsome.'

'I forget. I can't remember what it was

they said about him.' Mrs. Strait knitted her brows in an effort of memory. 'Something I know—that he was engaged or married, and his wife died, or his cousin—I can't think which; but there was something odd or wrong about him. He has not been here for seven or eight years.'

'How delightful a romance!' cried Margaret, laughing. 'That will be better than a three-year-old novel from the circulating library, which is all one ever can get here. You never told me this, mamma,' she added, in a tone of reproach.

'Well, my dear, you were too young.' Before Mrs. Strait's confused brain there began to dance a vision of some lapse in morals, or social delinquency, of Keith's, scarcely proper to discuss with young girls.

'What was it, mamma?—do think,' urged Margaret. 'Now gather up your brains and try to remember—do now, I ask you.'

Margaret put on her most fascinating look—the look which served to captivate a young curate or a stray tourist, or even an officer from the neighbouring garrison attracted by the trout-fishing sufficiently to pass a day or two in the village inn; but Mrs. Strait would not be captivated.

- 'I really can't remember,' she said. 'I don't think I ever heard correctly, and I am sure it was nothing edifying.'
- 'Nothing edifying!—of course not. We are not listening to a sermon, but to a real story,' Margaret cried gaily; 'something thrilling—a crime perhaps. Wouldn't it be nice to hear about that, Dorothy?'

'Yes, perhaps.'

Dorothy was staring straight before her into the fire.

- 'Ah, you have no soul!' said Margaret, with whom this was a favourite phrase of blame addressed to anyone who refused to share her opinions.
- 'Now, my dear, pray don't go troubling your head about matters that don't concern you,' urged Mrs. Strait nervously, to whom all this curiosity and liveliness of her elder daughter seemed incomprehensible. 'You had much better read aloud about Madame de Pompadour, as you did last night.'
- 'Madame de Sévigné, mamma,' said Margaret scornfully; 'Madame de Pompadour wasn't proper.'
- 'Oh, indeed!—ah, well, it was a slip of the tongue; but I dare say, poor thing, Madame de Pompadour was much to be pitied, and

didn't know any better. They did not read the Bible in those days, I believe.'

- 'They must have been rather jolly days, however court-balls and masquerades and torch-light *fêtes!*' said Margaret.
- 'And a scaffold for Marie Antoinette at the end!' added Dorothy quietly.
- 'What a damper you are, Dorothy! They had their fling, anyhow; and I dare say the guillotine did not hurt much. A little excitement and anxiety, even, would be a relief here, instead of the tiresome butcher calling regularly to know if we want ribs or a fillet of beef, or if the chops were tender; and, for an amusement, tea at the Vicarage or at Mrs. Parkinson's, with the eternal adjuncts of muffins and the company of her two cats, which really make me sick, staring and blinking at one like Christians out of their horrid green eyes, and seeming to disapprove of one from head to toe!'
- 'I can't think where you get your restlessness from, Margaret!' said Mrs. Strait, in a tone of wonder, laying down her knitting and peering at her daughter through watery grey eyes.
- 'Don't know, I'm sure,' cried Margaret, shrugging her shoulders, and crossing to the

piano, which she opened with a bang. Sitting down, she began to play Germaine's song from 'Les Cloches de Corneville.'

'There's a ghostly watchman who the bell will toll,
Ding-dong, ding-dong bell;
When the heir returneth, he will clang the bell.'

'That would do for Keith Chester, wouldn't it?' she asked, abruptly breaking off and turning round on the music-stool to call to her mother: 'Mamma, is he rich? What is he heir to?'

'I'm sure I don't know, dear. Blackness is only a small place.'

'Oh, how disappointing! Who ever heard of a poor heir returning? That would be flat indeed. Even the prodigal son had a rich father, who welcomed him and put a chain of gold about his neck. At least, if he is goodlooking, that will be something. I am sure if he has been a diplomat, and knocked about the world, he won't care for you, Dorothy, even though you are a walking dictionary of history. He might take a fancy to me, however. Mrs. Keith Chester — that would sound nice, wouldn't it? And then, mamma, you should have a pony-carriage. It will be my first present to you.'

'Margaret!'

Mrs. Strait's words of reproach were stifled in a kiss; for Margaret, unsettled as usual, had abandoned her music and leant over her mother's chair.

'What shall I be married in? I should prefer white velvet for the winter, and white silver tissue in summer, like a frosted doll on the top of a Christmas-cake,' she rattled on. Very pretty, isn't it, Dorothy? poetical enough even to please you. But, of course, a crinolinette—I insist on the crinolinette. What say you, Dolly, my bridesmaid?

Dorothy had laid the little dog gently upon the hearthrug, and was now seated at the table, making notes with a pencil in her pocket-book, while a fat volume reposed open at her elbow.

'I think you talk a great deal of nonsense,' she answered absently—'but oh, do you remember the name of the man who wrote the "Polyolbion?"'

'Of course not, dear; never heard the gentleman's name. Mamma, isn't it time for supper? it's past eight.'

'So it is, Margaret. Ring the bell, please. Sarah gets more unpunctual every day.'

The evening meal and leisurely gossip concluded, little Snow taught to beg and go through his diurnal tricks in anticipation of his dinner, Mrs. Strait was escorted to her room by her daughters, who interspersed their good-nights with kisses and affectionate recommendations. Margaret, singing snatches of her favourite 'ding-dong bell,' finally slammed-to the door of her own room, and Dorothy, carrying a volume of Stubbs's 'Constitutional History' under one arm, and a candle in her hand, sought the quiet of her bed-chamber. she first locked the door, an unnecessary precaution, for no one was likely to invade her sanctum; but the action inspired her with an additional sense of privacy. Then, depositing candle and book, she walked to the window. Habitually Dorothy read for some time in one of her big volumes, but never, however late the hour, did she omit the ceremony of approaching the window and looking out upon the prospect. On this occasion, the air had become considerably warmer since the afternoon, and the night had an Italian brilliancy. On the moonlit road the figure of a man was distinctly visible, the sound of his careless whistle heard; and in a field near might be recognised the dark shadowy forms of sheep.

Dorothy lifted the sash of the window, and leant out. Life was very peaceful, very

pleasant to her, with the assistance of her sister's bright society, the steady companionship of her books, and the engrossing nature of her serious studies. Yet sometimes on these quiet nights, hushed with a calm deeper than Dorothy's own, her breast seemed to fill with a hungry longing for the unknown, with a faint sense of unhappiness, of a vague and voiceless sadness. She was so depressingly alone—alone in her aspirations, in her devotion to work, and the acquiring of knowledge.

'And is this all?' she seemed to ask herself; 'is this unexciting round of occupation life? just a season of toil and effort, and then nothing more—no sensible result?'

Her still, reserved nature held no space for the frivolities of girls' thoughts, for the love of dress and display, or the temptations of foolish vanity; she could only experience silent wonder at people who cared for such things. Indeed, she would have been sorely puzzled to explain the existence of her unquiet sensations in the lonely watches of these starry nights, for the sensations seemed more like the revelation of some other self, as her heart expanded with a wealth of new and strange emotions. It was for this that she locked her door, in order to secure perfect privacy,

for a kind of felicitous spiritual communion. which eluded all definition. There is an awfulness in the very stillness and the shadows of the night, and to Dorothy it seemed as though she breathed a more rarefied air than that of the common workaday world on these occasions. The mystery of nature, the secret of man's sin and suffering, to the contemplation of which her historical studies predisposed her, received a new significance. There was a meaning in all things, an answer to her questionings, a reason for her yearnings; she knew, though as yet she groped darkly, life was not mere existence only, and the true perfect life must come to her in the far - away future. Strengthened and comforted, she presently returned to her candle and her big book, and read on diligently.





CHAPTER III.

NEW ARRIVALS.

ERE we are !'

Two young men drove up to the door of Blackness Park in an open fly, on the day following, which proved fine; and the speaker, the taller and darker of the two, stepped out as he uttered this remark.

'It is an awfully nice place,' said his friend, looking critically around at the park with the wide-spreading trees, and the sheep grazing peacefully on the short-cropped grass. 'What is the house like? If it is equal to the park, I don't pity you.'

His companion shrugged his shoulders with a foreign gesture, and said carelessly:

'That depends upon tastes. I don't care for English landscapes; they are too flat and deadly green and humdrum — just like the people themselves, so eminently respectable. I hate the word "respectable"; it is another name for dulness and stupidity.'

'Is that a river, that light streak down there in the distance?' said the other, unheeding this attempt at cynicism. 'It seems to me as if there ought to be trout-fishing.'

'Oh yes, that's the Frew, a very fair-sized river; and there are some fish in it, too, I believe. What a sportsman's scent for game you have, Johnnie! Come in now, and let's explore.'

They walked up the long shallow flight of steps, and rang at the bell. A servant hurried out to meet them, and an old housekeeper courtesied within.

'Ah!' said Keith, 'arrived all right, le Goui. How d'ye do, Mrs. Nutmeg? are our rooms ready?'

'Everything is prepared, sir.' The house-keeper courtesied again. 'I thought you would prefer the small blue sitting room, so I have got that ready.'

'Quite right, Mrs. Nutmeg. I hate fine apartments that are kept for show; and in the blue-room one can smoke comfortably What are you looking at, Johnnie?'

'Just a picture, a pencil-drawing of a woman. She has such a sweet expression.'

'Ah, I see!' A sad look passed over Keith's handsome face. 'That was my mother, poor soul. She was a beauty in her day, but she has been dead these many years. Now, come along and see my rooms.'

Blackness was comfortable and old-fashioned. not in the least smart or modern; though there was some good furniture, and in one or two of the bedrooms tapestry, and old silk hangings. The large drawing-room, which had not lately been used, bore the stiff and lugubrious aspect of a company-apartment; but the hall was homelike and pleasant. Portraits of blufflooking old gentlemen gazed benignly from the walls, where trophies of sport and memories of youthful days were also exhibited in the shape of a gigantic stuffed perch, a bow and arrow, and a glass-case filled with stuffed birds. A large space was occupied by the picture of a boy in a blouse and frilled trousers, seated on a white pony, while beside him stood a lady in a large poke-bonnet and scanty flounced white dress, whose honest maternal pride shone plainly from her countenance.

'My grandmother,' said Keith, as they ascended the stairs.

Johnnie Coote soon felt quite at home, especially when he had partaken of an excellent dinner, in which a well-roasted leg of mutton played a prominent part. When the dessert was placed on the table, the two men by common consent drew their chairs near the fire, and lit cigars.

'Keith, this is a very nice house, and you've a capital cook,' said Johnnie, stretching himself out comfortably.

He was young and fresh still, and did not disdain to admire. Keith Chester, who was older, and had rubbed off his prejudices, lost his illusions, and earned his experiences, smiled sarcastically.

'Glad you think so, old fellow. It's comfortable, certainly; but I should fancy dull.'

'Dull! Why, you've a pack of hounds near, and very good shooting in your own coverts, and trout in the river.'

'Don't forget the trout, Johnnie, old man; it's extraordinary the keenness you have about them. Yes, there is all that; but, unfortunately, I don't much care for sport. It seems such waste of energy.'

'Don't run yourself down, Keith. Why, you're a splendid shot; they all told me so at Monte Carlo, where you won the prize; and

I've seen you ride—you ride as if you liked it, too. I don't believe in a fellow doing anything well, unless he likes it.'

- 'No; I dare say you're right, Johnnie. There's a fair amount of worldly wisdom contained in that square close-cut head of yours.'
- 'I hate men with long hair,' broke in Johnnie impetuously.
- 'So do I. Yet why? If you come to think of it, nature intended us to have long hair; and it used to be worn long. There is really no fundamental difference after all in most things; it depends on our way of looking at them. The faith of one age is the superstition of another; the vices of one country are the virtues of another: it's as broad as it's long; and nothing matters provided one has a good cigar and a good dinner—eh, Johnnie?'
- 'I can't quite follow you, Keith, when you get into metaphysics about vices and superstitions, and all that, because I never learnt it at Eton; besides, I'm not clever: but I am sure there is such a thing as right and wrong. I mean, there are things a man who isn't a cad wouldn't do.'
- 'Poor Johnnie! you're a good fellow, but a little narrow; you have not marched with the times, as they say.'

Johnnie looked somewhat puzzled, while Keith leant back and laughed. He had a half-contemptuous, half-indifferent way of talking, and setting down other people's arguments as though they were not worthy of a serious answer, which was galling to many, but not to Johnnie, whose simple mind and genuine humility never permitted him to feel crushed.

'Shall you live here now, Keith?'

'I don't know; for a little I shall, I think. I've knocked about so much, that I feel as if I should almost prefer stagnation for a while. You can't think how tired one gets of fresh faces and new people—all equally uninteresting and indifferent; generally people who wouldn't go out of their way a yard to serve you; for the matter of that, I reciprocate the feeling. But I like you, Johnnie, though you're just only a mere slayer of beasts; for I feel you are honest, and really might shed a tear—metaphorically, of course; I shouldn't think of your behaving like a woman—over my misfortunes or my demise.'

'Of course I should. Why, Keith, we're "pals," ain't we? I mean, I hope we are.'

""Pals"? that's a word taken from the thief-language, I believe? Strange that we

should go to thieves for the definition of a friend. Well, I accept the word "pals" if you like—you wouldn't betray me, I think?

'I ?-good God, no !--of course.'

'Don't swear, Johnnie; the occasion isn't worth it. You think me a fortunate man, don't you? and yet there's not a soul in the world cares genuinely for me—except perhaps you (yes, I knew you would put that in)—and le Goui, as long as I pay him good wages; certainly no woman. Women have always bored and worried me; got all they could—except one. Yes, just that one; and to be sure, though she was fond of me, she worried me too.'

'And she?' Johnnie took the cigar out of his mouth, and stared expectantly.

'She-is dead!'

' Poor fellow!' ejaculated Johnnie.

'Why? She left me a fortune.'

'Oh!'

An idea had suddenly come to Johnnie, a remembrance of some gossip he had heard at his aunt's, a fashionable London lady, of a story repeated about Keith Chester. It was only a confused medley of reports and illnatured remarks; but he distinctly recollected

that some one had talked of a woman, very beautiful and rich, who had unaccountably left all her fortune to him.

'Do you think a man ought to take a fortune from a woman? Would you, for instance, Johnnie?'

'Certainly, if she loved me.'

'Well, Ida (her name was Ida) did love me, I believe. We were engaged to be married.'

'Then, I can perfectly understand, Keith, why this place seems dull and lonely to you. I spoke without thought, believe me. I had no idea of your—sorrow.'

Johnnie said 'sorrow' because it seemed the most appropriate word to use, yet he scarcely believed in his friend's grief.

Keith talked bitterly, disappointedly, but not like a man who has suffered, who has been struck down on the very threshold of life, whose beloved, the heart of his heart, has gone from him. In fact, love was the last thing to be associated with Keith—passion, trifling, love-making, but not love.

'Never mind,' said Keith, a scowl settling about his brow as he bit the corner of his slender moustache. 'I can bear it; it's a good while ago now—three years.'

'Has it—will it alter your life?'

- 'Has it spoilt my life, do you mean? Hardly. I was poor then, I am rich now. People may cavil at sentiment, but they cannot sneer at money. I am rich; women have told me I am good-looking, and I am free to do as I like. Does that sound conceited? I don't intend it so. I simply state facts. Let me see: I'm thirty-one. That seems no doubt a great age to you, Johnnie. You're what?'
 - 'Twenty-two.'
- 'Ah, twenty-two. That was just about my age when I first went abroad. One can feel strongly then, can't one? one is all heart, and chivalry, and honour—at least, you are.'
- 'It is awfully jolly to be young,' said Johnnie fervently.
- 'Awfully jolly, yes,' repeated his friend; but I'm afraid the rapture soon passes off. I'm not awfully jolly now. I feel old and indifferent and—bored. Society I find dull, solitude I can't stand, champagne I abhor, claret I scarcely drink. What is to be done, Johnnie?'
 - 'Marry!' said Johnnie quickly.
- 'True; that's an idea. I've tried everything but that. But then, the woman—she would have to be perfection. I've become so

exceedingly particular. She must be beautiful, for ugliness makes me ill; she must be young, of course; she must adore me, and she must never sicken me by her adoration: above all, she must be clever, and understand exactly what to say and how to say it. Do you know of such a paragon, Johnnie?

'No, I can't say I do.'

Johnnie shook his head sadly.

- 'I never thought you would. All the women you know are dolls of fashion who wear crimped fringes, and pinch in their waists, and have a flavour of rouge and slang about them.'
- 'My sisters are not that,' stammered out Johnnie.

Keith laughed heartily.

- 'Your sisters, my dear fellow; they are excellent good souls, and would suit a country parson or a homely squire admirably; but I must have something different. Do you know the meaning of *chic*?'
- 'It's a French word?' added Johnnie doubtfully.
- 'Yes, it's the most expressive word in the dictionary of French slang. It means that when a woman has that, she has everything. She may be ugly, short, stupid, but if she has

chic she can see every man at her feet, and defy every woman's hatred; because when she has gained a man's love, she will never lose it—he is hers for ever. That is chic.'

'An exceedingly unpleasant thing, I think,' said Johnnie decisively; 'fancy being obliged to love an ugly woman!'

'Beauty is a matter of taste, as I have already told you. I once knew a woman for whom three men had died, and two had fought a duel. She was not particularly handsome.'

'How strange!'

'Yes, the extraordinary influence of certain women is to me a very curious problem. I fancy they learnt the secret of charming from the serpent in the Garden of Eden.'

'Well, I suppose you don't want to marry a serpent?'

'Not exactly, but I shan't marry a fool. Fools cost too much—in expenditure of patience, brains, etc. No; better be hated by a clever woman than beloved by a fool.'

'You seem in a bad way, Keith.'

'Do you think so? Well now, hitherto I really believed I was an object of envy. See how one is deceived. Any way, I shall not marry till I find a woman to suit me exactly; and that, I expect, won't be just yet.'

The two men relapsed into silence, Johnnie resting his head, with the short fair hair, against the high-backed armchair, and letting his blue eyes wander thoughtfully up to the ceiling. One well-shaped hand with squaretipped fingers—the hand of a man of action rather than of thought-held his cigar, the other lay aimlessly on the elbow of his chair; his straight, somewhat thick nose, his pleasant, good-humoured mouth, his frank and manly smile and clear complexion, proclaimed him what he was—a straightforward, pure-hearted, well-born young Englishman. Keith Chester was a remarkable contrast to him in all things. He was tall, and more lithe in build than is usually the case with the Saxon type. restless, irritable expression somewhat marred the beauty of his handsome features, and caused people who did not know him to think him ill-tempered. His silky black hair curled in tiny waves over his head; his skin, very pale by nature, seemed mellowed, in the warmth of foreign suns, till it had attained an almost Oriental glow; his eyes, though really blue, with black lashes, were placed in such a depth of shadow that they appeared black.

His hands, refined and delicate as carved ivery, could yet stiffen upon an obnoxious

object. His strength was the strength of nerve and will-power rather than heaviness of bulk. As you looked at him you were first impressed by his beauty, which was out of the common, and yet of so intellectual a type that he never reminded you of a mere pretty fellow. As you studied his face you read in it lines of thought, traces of passion, flashes of temper and determination, utterly at variance with the somewhat languid poses he affected, and the nonchalance he indulged, with regard to most things. He attracted you in the first instance; he interested you in the second; finally, somewhat inexplicably, he repelled you. But few ever reached the stage of intimacy in which they were repelled; and Johnnie, as yet, was completely under the spell of his fascination. For Keith was remarkable in this respect, that men were even more enthusiastic partisans of his than women, who, as a rule, while they courted and flattered, yet mistrusted him.

'Johnnie, you've remained silent an uncommonly long time,' presently said Mr. Chester. 'What are you thinking about?'

Johnnie coloured; a trick which procured for him from his comrades frequent mockery. He dared not say that he had been thinking of 'Ida,' the woman who loved and died, and left a fortune, and the story of her strange blighted life—that he was wondering what she was like, and how much she had loved Keith.

'Do you know, old fellow, we ought to go to the little blue-room and have our coffee. It's getting unconscionably late.'

So the two friends rose and went to the little blue-room, Keith's own sanctum, where the walls were coloured a deep blue, and gold mottoes decorated the doors and panelling, the divans and couches, luxuriously covered in quaint Eastern stuffs, inviting to repose.

"There is no place like home," hummed Keith, lighting a fresh cigar. 'It's eight years since I was here—a whole lifetime. To-morrow we'll wander about and look at the rustics. I suppose not one of them I knew is alive still. Let me see: there's the clergyman; he is a new-comer, and has married since his arrival. Mrs. Strait, the widow of a literary man who died here: she had some pretty children; they may have grown up nice-looking. And—and Mrs. Parkinson, the female Don Quixote who was always riding some charitable hobby to death; she must have grown elderly, but she invariably knew all the gossip in the village. Then besides,

there are, of course, the county people—Lord and Lady Darlington, for instance—but they none of them live near, and I have no doubt they would not remember me.'

'I shall be happy fishing,' said Johnnie meekly; 'don't trouble about society for me.'

'Oh well, now that I've come back, it does not do to shut one's self up. We may as well make the best of it. I'll run over in my memory the names of any other people I know.'





CHAPTER IV.

AT BLACKNESS PARK.

RECISELY at half-past nine the next morning the two young men met in the dining-room. The hour had been arranged as a compromise between Keith's early foreign habits and Johnnie's idle English ones. And the morning sun, as it shone on the spotless cloth, the brilliant silver, and the gold-coloured marmalade in a quaint glass dish, rarely lighted a more pleasant scene. Johnnie appeared spotlessly fresh, clean, and glowing. Keith looked remarkably handsome; the bright light suited his delicately carved, classical features, and the pale tints of his complexion did not suffer. His eyes rested now with pleasure on his friend.

'Johnnie, there's no doubt about it,' he said with a smile; 'the English are the cleanest, smartest men in the universe; your freshness this morning is positively overpowering.'

'I have an overpowering appetite,' the other answered, as he poured himself out a cup of tea, and filled his plate with hot sausages. 'I feel as if I could eat a house. It's this stunning country air. I slept like a top, too.'

'You may pass muster for looks, Johnnie, but your language is slang. Why make use of all those unclassical expressions?'

'Slang! What do you mean? I only said, "I slept like a top!"'

'Just so. I grant there is a great amount of expression in the terms you adopt; but they are not elegant.'

'No. Who wants elegance?' said Johnnie, with his mouth full of sausage; 'that's only for girls!'

'And girls themselves don't care for it nowadays. I declare they sometimes set my teeth on edge with their horsey, loud, and masculine ways. I expect ulsters and billycock hats are at the bottom of that, however. How can a woman look a woman, or anything but a coarse knock-about kind of creature, in an ulster?'

- 'I think they are lovely,' said Johnnie; 'show off a girl's figure to perfection!'
- 'Don't you prefer something to be left to the imagination—just a trifle, if it be only the suggestion of a curve or the idea of a line that is not unduly displayed?'
- 'My dear fellow, I'm no good at that kind of thing. I have no imagination; though I flatter myself I am an excellent judge of a good figure when I see one.'
- 'Well, talking of that, I fancy we are rather in luck; for I had a long talk with Mrs. Nutmeg this morning while you were steadily snoring, and she says the parson's wife is a very pretty woman, with fine eyes; and that Mrs. Strait's two daughters are exceedingly handsome — "regular beauties," she called them: but one must take all that I don't suppose housekeepers know much about the orthodox type of beauty, nor of what constitutes it. Your village belle is generally common-looking, with round red cheeks, like the apples in her own orchard. Mrs. Strait was a pretty woman once, I believe, though she must always have been characterless; reminding one of the flabby, woolly-tasting peaches which are all gardeners can produce in their hothouses in a wet

season. The father was very well-bred looking, but delicate. He died before I left England, ten years ago; so I suppose Mrs. Strait has consoled herself for his loss by this time. We will go down and call this afternoon.'

'But you won't keep me all day paying afternoon calls,' remonstrated Johnnie piteously; 'because, my dear fellow, I did not come to the country for that.'

'No—no; you shall fish this morning till lunch-time. We are going to be thoroughly English now, and indulge in no more dejectners à la fourchette! Do you remember our last at the Café Voisin, in Paris, when that handsome Mrs. Steer was with us? She has run away from her husband now, I hear, with some rascal of a Russian attaché. The husband was not a bad fellow either; a capital judge of horses. But I have long ago found out that women never know what they want, or when they are well off; the handsomer the woman, the greater fool she makes of herself in her rage for admiration.'

'So she ran away, did she?' said Johnnie meditatively. 'I wonder why?'

'Never wonder why a woman does anything,' said Keith; 'it is complete waste of time. Women are queer creatures, the only beings in creation whose laws of motion you cannot

codify; the nicest ones behave so strangely as to dispel all idea that they can reason from false sentiment, they generally prefer a scamp, and usually deceive an honest fool. The highly moral man is unattractive, I presume.'

'You have a very low opinion of women!'

'My own experience has not been entirely satisfactory, you see. When a man has been tricked and fooled and flattered during his life, and has perhaps tricked and fooled a bit in return, he must be a ninny if he does not profit by the lessons he has received. I have profited. I adore women, and admire them extremely, but I never trust them more than I can avoid.'

'Would you not trust your wife, then?'

'That is quite another thing. I might, or I might not. I should not be so blind as to trust her because she is my wife; I might trust her in spite of her being my wife. You perceive it entirely depends on the class of woman?'

'I could not marry on those terms.' Johnnie put down his napkin, pushed away his plate, and lay back in his chair, with his legs crossed, while he felt for his cigarette-case. 'If I did not believe in my wife, I should be the most miserable of men!'

'Probably.' Keith had risen, and stood leaning against the mantelshelf; the graceful easy pose of his head resembling that of some antique figure. 'You will be the regular uxorious husband, I imagine; and I dare say you will be monstrous happy. Nature occasionally gives us a revanche.'

At that instant the door opened to admit le Goui. 'If you please, sir, Mr. Flint would like to see you, and the keeper is here for Mr. Coote.'

'Johnnie, my boy,' said his friend lightly, 'there you are; go to your trout, and enjoy perfect bliss, while I—go to my agent and succeed in getting my pocket emptied and my head racked!'

Johnnie lost no time in doing as he was bid, leaving Keith alone to meditate.

It seemed to the latter very strange, this return to the home of his father—to the cradle of his childhood, full of numberless insignificant, yet none the less sweet memories—to the quiet country life, the occupations and amusements that had continued unchanged ever since his last sojourn, each event happening with mechanical accuracy: the agent calling to discuss business, the smiling important housekeeper, the daily ordering of dinner. He knew exactly what Mr. Flint

would say. He would remark that the day was fine, but there had been a slight frost last night; that the pheasants were not so plentiful as might have been expected from the number turned out last year, and the quantity of money they cost, for which he begged leave to produce the bills; that the tenants were mostly behindhand in their rents, but that, judging from the mild winter and the present satisfactory state of the country, better things might be expected at Midsummer. All these and kindred topics pursued Keith with a strong and persistent familiarity. Had he been wise in absenting himself all these years?—was he wise in returning now?

Such questions he conned over in his mind, as he stood in front of the bright wood-fire and looked out to his left upon the smooth lawn and the tidy terraces and the corner view of the orangery.

To a man who loved home, Blackness would have seemed a paradise; to a man who had been a Bohemian by training and was one by nature, it spoke only of heavy responsibilities, of unwelcome ties, and of doubtful pleasure. 'I shall not stay here long, at any rate,' thought Keith; 'and meanwhile, it is as well to mix a bit with one's equals, with the country gen-

tlemen and landowners, and try to understand their prejudices and obstinate old-fashioned ways. I wonder what they will think of me? Yet, why should I ask? They know I have this—the golden key.' With an unpleasant smile he chinked the few golden sovereigns he carried in his trousers-pocket together with his hand, taking them out, letting them run through his fingers into the palm of his other hand, then replacing them in his pocket with a sharp jingle of metal. 'It is all right; and now for Flint and his jeremiads about the rents.'

An easy master Keith proved himself, on that morning, to the practical and matter-of-fact agent. While the latter sat painfully upright at the writing-table, his hat, riding-whip, and gloves carefully placed on the nearest chair, making notes on loose sheets of foolscap-paper, Keith lolled, smoking, in an armchair. Occasionally he threw in little cynical remarks, or some sharp piece of worldly wisdom, but for the most part he permitted the agent to do all the talking, and merely bowed his head to endorse special views.

'On the whole then, Flint, I may conclude affairs look promising. Jackson, you say, has not paid his rent for the last two quarters?'

'No; and indeed he pleads utter incapacity

to do so. I know the hay-harvest was bad, and several of his cows died of pleuro-pneumonia; but I am sure he *could* pay if he was pressed. Besides, there is the bad example. Shall I give him notice to quit?

- 'Stop a bit—he's a lazy fellow, you say?'
- 'Very lazy, with a long head and a sharp tongue.'
- 'And has a good, hardworking wife and four children?'
- 'Yes, his wife is as good a manager as any hereabouts.'
 - 'Then---'
- 'Then I have your permission to get rid of him?' put in the agent promptly.
- 'Then let him stay. Poor wretch, he's married—he has given hostages to fortune.'

The agent stared. Gentlemen who had lived much in foreign countries indulged in a queer way of transacting business.

- 'But, Mr. Chester, I told you he was lazy; he is a Radical, too, bitten with some of these new-fangled ideas about land.'
- 'Exactly; I should like to study the genus. No, no, Flint, let him stay on, and turn out anyone else you like.'
- 'At present,' Mr. Flint began, 'I confess I cannot see the exact drift of your policy.'

'Nor can I. The fact is, I have no policy; I don't understand anything about the management of estates, and, what is more, I never shall. I can't imagine why people are so excessively keen to possess land; the three per cents or a snug little affair in railways, is a far pleasanter and more profitable speculation.'

'But land is not a speculation; it is property, vested rights, a much-valued possession—at least, that is how we look upon it.'

'In England, of course. Well, you see, I have lived abroad a good deal; I have been in Russia—have you ever been in Russia?—no; most interesting country, I assure you—and my ideas about land have, in consequence of much and varied experience, received some modification. I am not at all sure that land ought not practically to be the possession of the occupier to do as he likes with, so long as he pays rent.'

'But that is rank Socialism,' gasped out Mr. Flint, his red, weather-beaten face lengthening exceedingly.

'Is it? then possibly there may be more in Socialism than I thought—anyway, leave Jackson alone.'

Mr. Flint bowed. He could not speak. His employer's extraordinarily lax theories

about land had fairly bewildered and confused him. When gentlemen, landowners themselves, spoke like this, what was to be expected or hoped in the future?'

- 'By-the-bye,' Mr. Chester continued, not heeding the confusion into which he had thrown his man of business, 'what kind of a person is the clergyman? He is a newcomer since my time, and he is married, I hear. Is she—presentable?'
- 'Mrs. Maynard is charming,' answered Mr. Flint with alacrity; 'a most ladylike person.'
 - 'Ladylike—ah—and he?'
- 'Well-meaning; a little infatuated, but well-meaning.'
- 'In what sense do you intend both these adjectives?'
 - 'Well, really---'

Mr. Flint's mind, though excellent at accounts, was not quite so ready with definitions, and the sharp fusillade of Keith's deliberate questions somewhat overpowered him.

- 'Is he an earnest man? Does he preach well?'
- 'Oh yes, he is all that; and he is an excellent visitor among the poor—does his parish work well, you know. But he's queer—decidedly queer.'

Mr. Chester's keen eyes demanded further information.

'Well, I mean,' resumed the agent, having felicitously succeeded in remembering some special point, 'has early services—no one attends but a few old women. And—and candles on the altar.'

'Indeed; that constitutes his queerness. I have a great deal to learn yet about English ways. They have changed somewhat—shall I say improved?—since I went abroad.'

'Are you High Church then?' demanded Mr. Flint. 'Your family have hitherto been very moderate in their ecclesiastical views.'

'My views are—well, I really don't know what they are. I learnt the Lord's prayer at my mother's knee, and I have read the Bible; I have also read Strauss's and Renan's criticisms upon it, and as much as I could assimilate of Ewald's and Baur's works. How does that strike you?'

'I am sure Mr. Maynard and yourself will never agree.'

'Perhaps; who knows? The unlikely is always the most probable—at least, in diplomacy. In religion it may be different. A propos, I thought of calling on Mrs. Strait this afternoon. She has daughters?'

'Yes, and they are good-looking girls.'

This was the second time in one day Keith had heard them spoken of with approval, and between the housekeeper's admiring expression of 'regular beauties,' and the agent's 'good-looking girls,' he fancied he could strike the just balance; they must be moderately handsome, probably countrified women. 'No chance of *chic* here,' he thought to himself with a yawn.

'Shall we walk round the garden, Flint? I want to see what improvements have taken place there, and also if you wish for any trees to be cut down in the shrubbery. I never knew an Englishman yet who was not keen to cut down a tree—"lest it cumber the ground," as Scripture says. You see I have retained some knowledge of the Bible.'

The two now sallied forth on to the terrace, Keith walking with a slow and deliberate step, learnt in the course of his flaneries abroad; Mr. Flint moving with quick and inelastic gait, seemingly constructed in one jointless mass, ill-natured people were wont to remark. He was a keen observer, however, of such points as his profession had familiarized him with; he noted at once the tree that obstructed a view, or the spreading branches

of which were impeded by the growth of an evergreen, or a pine with a long name. He suggested changes in the flower-beds, and urged the necessity for new gravel paths.

- 'We did not like to do all this, sir, you see, in your absence. You might not have liked it.'
- 'I assure you,' said Keith languidly, 'I never object to your meddling with inanimate objects; it is only the human animal I demur about. What is this? By Jove! it is as pretty as the lake with the Temple of Diana in the Villa Pallavicini,' he added with animation.
- 'Ah, that,' Mr. Flint smiled consciously, 'is a little idea of my own. You see, this large pond was always here; but I have improved it.'

'You have indeed; it is a perfect poem.'

Mr. Flint felt that Keith meant to imply unbounded approval of his design, but he would have preferred a more workmanlike comment than that of 'perfect poem' upon its execution.

The ground sloped from the terrace gently towards the lake, round whose edges, in their season, yellow irises, bulrushes and water-lilies formed an enchanting garland. In the middle, rising sheer from the still water, was a

cone-shaped island, crowned with a weeping-willow, the sides of which were a tangled mass of ferns, flowering shrubs, drooping ivy, and feathery pampas-grass. A rustic bridge spanned the space from island to shore, and beside it was moored a tempting little boat. Curious and lively water-fowl, black ducks with red beaks, little grey moorhens, bright-plumaged quackers with their sombre-vested wives, a couple of snowy-white swans swimming in luxurious elegance and pride, holding their arched necks in the air with all the conscious dignity of aristocrats, made a stir and animation around the silent and transparent pool.

'It is beautiful in summer,' said Mr. Flint, 'when the foxgloves and honeysuckle are in flower.'

'It is beautiful now!' said Keith, with a sigh.

It caused him a strange sensation, to whom all kinds of loveliness spoke in no indifferent strain, to know that this simple and exquisite beauty was his. The very luxuriant verdure, the twining, creeping grace of the semi-wild flowers and shrubs, with their curved tendrils and caressing wreaths, their upward plumes and airy lightness, formed a complete contrast

to the hardly cultivated herbage and dried-up soil of the foreign climes with which his senses had grown familiar. The view possessed all the peculiar charm of England—its modest, fertile, dewy beauty; and to Keith's practised eye it appealed eloquently. He stood a long while rapt and gazing.

'I thank you, Flint, for having arranged this lovely spot,' he said, at last turning away.

Mr. Flint found the nut hard to crack. A patron who permitted impecunious tenants to keep on their farms; who held the most Socialistic notions about such fundamental institutions as the rights of property; who read the Bible, and said he did not know if he had any religion; finally, who went into rhapsodies about a leafy island in the middle of a pond—was decidedly, to say the least of it, an exceptional character.

Keith presently took a short leave of his agent, remarking it was nearly luncheon-time, and turned slowly towards the house. Near the corner of the orangery he met Johnnie, with radiant face.

'I've caught some beauties, Keith; we'll have them for dinner. I have a particular receipt for a sauce, which I'll concoct my-

self. You could eat your own grandfather with it.'

'Very well, Johnnie. I dare say it's excellent; only don't make me eat anything so objectionable as a grandfather, that's all.'





CHAPTER V.

VISITORS.

UNCHEON over, the two young men walked briskly down the avenue, the light of youthful gladness and successfully concluded sport in

Johnnie's eyes, a half-saddened, half-doubtful expression in those of Keith. The day was very lovely, full of the peculiar crispness and tonic qualities of the English air, succeeding a slight frost. Keith's artistic perception realized that the soft cloudy outline bathed in a bluishgreen haze of the distant woods, and the warm tints of the tree-stems, or the shadows of fleecy brooding clouds, were as beautiful as the clearly defined colouring of hill and valley in his beloved Italy, and that they possessed the charm of mysterious softness which no

crystalline angularity could compensate for. They turned immediately to the right on passing through the lodge-gates of Blackness—the road to the left led to the station—and pursued their way down a winding road edged by holly-bushes, and oak-trees whose trunks were smothered in glossy ivy-wreaths. At the bottom of a steep hill, a heavy laden cart and horses toiled painfully upward. It was a homely pastoral scene, like one of those Birket Foster or Constable loved to paint.

Johnnie did not trouble himself about the picturesque, but talked gaily on all sub-English scenery seemed commonplace enough to him. Like Dr. Johnson, he held that 'when you have seen one green field, you have seen all green fields;' caring as he did only for the sport, not for the country itself. Naturally one could not hunt in Cheapside, therefore one must go to the country if one wanted hunting. Keith, on the other hand, liked Cheapside well enough, for the study of men had been the study of his life; but yet, when surrounded by lovely scenery, he could surrender himself heart and soul to the enjoyment of the beauties of nature. It resulted that Keith,

during the short walk, remained silent. He was thinking of the Winter Exhibition of Watercolours he had but lately seen in London, and comparing the tints in the pictures there with the colouring of the landscape before him. He could paint a little, just as he could play the violin a little; he had dabbled in almost everything, and the result was, in consequence of his own efforts, a supreme contempt on his part for any work in the least degree amateurish. A good deal is to be gained from the knowledge of the technique of an art; but again, the capacity for being easily pleased is lost, leaving in its stead frequently only an irritable dissatisfaction with most things. On this pleasant exhilarating day, however—a day to blow cobwebs out of the brain and blue devils from whatever may be their distinctive abode—Keith felt tolerably well pleased. had done some good work in the morning, a fact which always indues people with a delightful sense of contentment, and he was about to pay a visit to two pretty girls. This was enough to satisfy even a jaded man of the world for a few hours.

'Aren't we getting there?' said Johnnie, who was young enough to be impatient.

'In a moment,' Keith answered, perversely

standing still and looking round him. 'Isn't England fresh? I never noticed its remarkable freshness before. I suppose it is the damp.'

- 'Of course; that's what gives the women good complexions,' said Johnnie carelessly. 'What are you staring at?'
- 'Nothing, my dear fellow. A cow under a tree, flicking off the flies with its tail; and a pond—look at the grass behind it, of a deep rich green, then the vivid verdigris of that clump of duckweed against it, the clear dark brown of the water, and the distinct reflections in a paler tint of brown of each leaf and grass and bending bulrush. It reminds me of Paul Potter.'

'Paul Potter!' Johnnie appeared relieved.

'Does he keep a great many cows?'

Keith laughed aloud.

'My dear fellow, he was a painter.'

Johnnie was a little crestfallen at his mistake, and tried to remember a shorthorn-breeder of the name, so as to vindicate his accuracy.

By this time they had entered the long straggling village of Dronington.

'We had better call at the Vicarage first,' Keith remarked. 'It is here.'

They stopped in front of a small white

house shadowed by a green, creeper-covered veranda. Keith walked through the little gate and across the garden, and rang the bell loudly.

'Is Mr. Maynard at home?' he asked of the trim maid-servant, who first hesitated, but finally, seeing the visitor well dressed and determined, answered:

'Yes.'

Johnnie followed his friend, and the two were presently shown into a small, neatly furnished drawing-room. The furniture was of that new pseudo-antique description so much affected by persons of moderate incomes, but the colours were tastefully chosen, and the forms of the chairs correct. On the walls hung several old prints and miniatures, while some evidently valuable china was disposed on brackets. A cottage-piano stood in one Keith glanced at the loose music corner. lying carelessly upon it: he noticed bits of the oratorio of 'Saul' and a motett of Palestrina's. 'Ah, I forgot,' murmured Keith softly. 'Flint said he was High Church.'

They had not long to wait before Mr. Maynard made his appearance. He was tall and dark, had massive features and a black beard, and wore the orthodox ecclesiastical

garb tightly buttoned round his throat. He spoke in quick, decided, vibrating tones, as if his voice were accustomed to the echoing space of a large church.

'Very glad to see you, Mr. Chester. It is a long time since you have been here, I understand; but I have often wished you could come home. It seems a pity to leave a number of distinct duties deliberately undone.'

'Do you think so?' said Keith, now quite at his ease, having introduced his friend by a word and a wave of the hand. 'Duties are like mosquitoes—they have a maddening power of persistency.'

'The only way to get rid of them then,' said the priest, smiling, 'is to kill them, like the mosquitoes, by leaving none to worry you.'

'Everyone is not capable of such self-denial,' Keith answered.

'No, or else there would be no further need of sermons.'

Mrs. Maynard appeared at this moment, pushing the door gently open, and entering with a half-shy modesty that became her admirably. Johnnie decided at once that she had beautiful eyes, and was altogether far too

pretty to be a clergyman's wife, and immured in a country parsonage. The ceremony of presentation over, they all four talked amicably. Keith explained that he had only arrived a day ago, and was on his way to visit the Straits.

- 'Ah, the Straits!' said Mrs. Maynard, with a slight lifting of her eyebrows; 'you are sure to find them at home.'
- 'The daughters are pretty?' interrogated Keith, remembering the German proverb, 'All good things are three;' he had already asked the question twice in twenty-four hours.
- 'Oh yes—pretty!' said Mrs. Maynard, with some perceptible hesitation. 'Dorothy has no style, and Margaret is noisy.'

Keith at once set down these observations to woman's envy, and felt convinced that the Miss Straits must be better-looking than he had believed.

- 'Delightful girls, both!' broke in Mr. Maynard; 'Dorothy, especially, is so fresh.'
- 'Now, there I don't agree with you, Charles. Dorothy is always up in the clouds or else deep in musty old books.'
- 'Well, what can be fresher than a young lady who comes straight from the clouds?'

Mrs. Maynard shrugged her shoulders

pettishly, but the action became her; and Johnnie noticed again that the dark-blue serge fitted to perfection, and showed off her exceptionally graceful figure.

'Charles is infatuated,' she said, after a pause, 'because they were the first girls that came to early service. There was nothing surprising in that, for of course there is very little excitement here; but they don't come now—you know they don't, Charles.'

Charles put up a finger warningly. Evidently the husband and wife had an occasional argument; but the clergyman had no idea of exposing the weaknesses of his own household, and quickly chose a new subject.

- 'Do you find Blackness changed?' he asked of Mr. Chester.
- 'Not much, except that Flint has become poetical, and enlarged the lake and designed a fairy island.'
- 'Yes, that was a sweet bit of art in nature; for the first two weeks all my parishioners were wild to see it. The gardener had boasted so of its wonders, that I had to persuade Flint to admit them, a few at a time, to stare. I called it "the People's Park." It actually kept some of the men from the public-house for two consecutive Sundays. The walk there

and the walk back took up all the time they usually spent in drinking beer.'

'That seems a conclusive argument against Sabbatarianism, doesn't it?' said Keith pleasantly, though he feared the remark might lead to a religious discussion.

'There is a good deal to be urged on both sides,' answered the clergyman, who apparently did not consider the moment propitious for argument.

Presently Keith rose, and Mr. Maynard accompanied his visitors to the gate.

- 'I hope you will come again soon,' he said heartily; 'you seem to bring a whiff of the London air with you, which is pleasant. We are a humdrum lot here.'
- 'Shall you call to see me, even though I do not attend early services?' asked Keith, with intention.
- 'Certainly; they that are whole do not need a physician, but they that are sick,' said Mr. Maynard, with a cordial shake of the hand.
 - 'Then you do believe I am sick?'
- 'You led me to think so by your remark. At present I have no means of judging.'
- 'Well answered,' thought Keith; 'he will not commit himself.' He then again said good-bye, lifting his hat politely to pretty Mrs. Maynard.

- 'Not half a bad fellow that, for a parson,' remarked Mr. Chester, when he and Johnnie were out of earshot; 'a more manly specimen than you find generally. I feel like Diogenes with his lantern, when I am among priests, as a rule. I should like to look for a man amongst them: their cloth and their creed seems to take all their backbone away.'
- 'She's very pretty,' ejaculated Johnnie irrelevantly, pulling his hat over his eyes.
 - 'Who?' asked Keith innocently.
 - 'That parson's wife!'
- 'Yes; there's a mystery about her, I'll be bound. Like Mrs. Siddons, "I marvel how she gat there." A parsonage is certainly not her normal sphere. Johnnie, my boy, you must not look so admiringly at every woman you meet with those clear blue orbs of yours. I felt quite embarrassed for her.'
 - 'Did you? She was not embarrassed.'
- 'No; women never avoid admiration. Why, this must be the Angel House—yes, of course I remember the old wall, but it is a good deal more tumble-down than it was ten years ago. I wonder if they keep a page or a maid-servant, and whether they are at home.'

The answer to their ring was deferred some time, till Johnnie, shuffling first on one foot, then on another, began to whistle, and finally rang again. This time the bell was promptly answered, and a maid, quietly obeying the summons with an air of innocence as though she had never before heard the bell ring, soon ushered them into the drawing-room. It was empty (as a rule on these occasions drawing-rooms always are empty). Keith was at once impressed with its individuality.

- 'What a charming room, Johnnie! So cool and green—a room to dream in. I had quite forgotten it was so pretty. What say you?'
- 'I wish the girls would come,' said the practical Johnnie, who did not care for furniture and carvings.

Meanwhile, there was a flutter among the doves in the Angel House. Margaret, on the alert as usual, had spied the two young men from afar.

- 'Mamma, I declare,' she said, in agitated tones, 'they are coming here! Quick—put on another cap; that one is so shabby. And you, Sarah, don't answer the bell for a minute. Make haste, mamma!'
- 'Oh, my dear,' said Mrs. Strait breathlessly, standing on the stairs, while Margaret, who had flown up triumphantly, hauled a cap out

of a bonnet-box, and rushing down again, now pinned the said appendage firmly on her mother's head, 'what a day for visitors! I feel I am all awry. I was in such a hurry this morning. Sarah brought in her books; and it's the day for me to look over the linen. I declare I'm all in a flutter.'

'Never mind, mamma,' said Margaret briskly, pulling her collar straight, arranging the folds, and giving a quiet determined pat and tug to the various portions of her mother's raiment. 'It's all right. There were two young men—just fancy, two! Where is Dorothy? She must leave her books and come down. Sarah, go and tell Miss Dorothy.'

The two women descended to receive their visitors; Mrs. Strait looking a lady, and more composed in her manner than might have been expected from her previous flurry and excitement; Margaret, as usual, strikingly beautiful.

Keith had not expected such good looks. He could see at a glance that she was not countrified. He did not even think her noisy, as Mrs. Maynard had said; but he thought her wonderfully bright and amiable. As for Johnnie, he was already, according to

his own later description, 'struck all of a heap.'

'It is so pleasant to have visitors,' Margaret said, smiling impartially towards both the young men, 'and I am so glad we were at home. It would have been dreadful to miss you.'

Keith thought this show of delight immensely natural and attractive.

'Don't you see many people, then?'

'Nobody!' emphatically announced Margaret.

'Oh, my dear!'

The mother looked meekly perturbed at her daughter's bold assertion.

'Well, nobody worth speaking of. Just the village people and an occasional call from the county folks; but they always look down upon us, though they honour us with a quantity of pretty speeches, because we're not county people; and that is a bore. I do love society.'

'Of course you do,' said Keith. 'We always like the particular set of circumstances in which we feel that we shine most. I should think you might easily gratify your desires. Society would be very happy to have you.'

'But unless I were rich it would be no good.

One can't go to a ball every night in the same gown, and I should like lots of dresses, and very nice ones.'

'Naturally.'

Keith spoke seriously, but Margaret had a kind of intuition that he was laughing at her. She turned to Johnnie.

'Shall you stay here long, and do you play lawn-tennis?'

Johnnie's face brightened.

- 'I shall be very happy to play with you.'
- 'I suppose you are a first-rate player? Dorothy plays better than I do.'
 - 'Dorothy is- ?'
 - 'My sister. Here she comes.'

As the youngest Miss Strait glided towards the speakers, Keith thought for an instant that he was the victim of some illusion, and that a figure from one of Fra Angelico's pictures had stepped out of its frame. She was dressed in a closely clinging, straight-cut robe of grey stuff, full about the breast and sleeves, and gathered in by a band at her waist. Some soft kind of ruching surrounded her neck, and in its folds, just at the birth of the throat, there nestled a bunch of golden daffodils. Her large serene eyes were full of quiet interest; her hair, like that of the pictured

angels, fell in waves round her smooth white brow.

'By Jove!' Keith thought to himself; 'she is a regular beauty!'

For a while he allowed Johnnie, who was never at a loss with ladies, to do all the talking, while he himself sat still and looked on, returning the vaguest answers to Mrs. Strait's disjointed remarks. Keith had often seen beauty like that of Dorothy's in pictures. Of course, he had not fruitlessly been an habitué of galleries. The type was perfectly familiar to him, but the human embodiment of it was not so.

He ran over in his mind all the handsome women he had met at Rome, Paris, and Vienna. Not one had such exquisite repose, such perfection of feature, such serene unconsciousness.

'Where did they rear such a paragon?' he thought wonderingly, watching the veins in her eyelids, which she frequently kept bent down, and listening to the sweet and marvellously clear intonation of her speech. Lawntennis altogether seemed quite too prosaic an affair to discuss with her, though, to be sure, she would look splendid, with arm uplifted like a Diana.

Johnnie made no end of appointments and projects of appointments with the girls, before he took his leave, but Keith only spoke once, when he succeeded in attracting Dorothy's attention, and asked her if she was fond of pictures.

'No; more fond of books,' promptly answered Margaret. 'She is always poring over some dull old book or another.'

Dorothy, at this unexpected revelation, could but look imploring. Keith gallantly came to her rescue.

'We must not intrude on Miss Strait's secrets, but I am sure she likes pictures. You have imagination, Miss Strait, and pictures are a kind of embodied imagination.'

This speech, and some succeeding ones, which were merely the clap-trap utterances of a connoisseur expected to propound mysterious aphorisms, seemed to Dorothy the proof of exceeding culture and cleverness.

- 'I never see any pictures,' she said, 'but I dare say I should be fond of them.'
- 'Surely in the neighbourhood there must be collections. I myself have a few.'
- 'I was never at Blackness—in the house, I mean.'
 - 'Never? Mrs. Strait, will you come and

see my house, pray give me the pleasure of your company, and fix the day.'

'To-morrow,' promptly suggested the everready Johnnie.

'Yes, to-morrow; mamma, do let us go!' pleaded Margaret.

Dorothy said nothing, but Keith fancied she inwardly reiterated the prayer.

'Shall we not intrude on Mr. Chester?' Mrs. Strait began, nervously pleating at her apron—for a decision quickly to be taken invariably tried her. 'So many ladies, and you are only two young men.'

'The greater the pleasure, then,' said Keith, with his finest diplomatic politeness.

'Mamma will come,' asserted Margaret.
'Leave it to me, I'll settle it. What time shall we fix?'

'My dear, you are very presumptuous——'protested her mother feebly.

'Two o'clock, luncheon,' interrupted Johnnie.

'Yes, to luncheon, please,' said Keith.
'One can talk better after luncheon, and I can show you the fairy island and all the pictures. I have a very good Hogarth, a Murillo, a Gainsborough, and perhaps I may be so fortunate as to own some pictures you will like.'

Dorothy's eyes glistened with pleasure. Keith gazed long into her face as he pressed her hand at parting, while a delicate roseflush mounted to her cheeks.

'Susceptible as a sensitive-plant,' ran his mental comment.

Keith pleaded fatigue, and retired early to rest that evening, much to Johnnie's annoyance, who loved to sit smoking and talking, and airing his impressions. He had just received some worthy of consideration. First there was Mrs. Maynard; he was still true in his admiration of her, though prone to confess that Margaret eclipsed her on all points. She had finer eyes, a more glowing complexion, a more symmetrical figure, and, above all, five or six more years of youth in her favour. Still, Mrs. Maynard had a peculiarly insinuating manner, of which the guileless Johnnie had felt the influence.

'I believe her to be a spiteful little puss, with the velvet paw and the long claws of the conventional cat,' Keith made answer to his declarations.

'That is just like you; pouring cold water on a fellow's feelings. A diplomat always believes people want to outwit him; he is suspicious by nature. Now I think Mrs. Maynard is truth itself.'

'Perhaps.'

- 'That means you don't think so. I call that very unfair on a nice little woman.'
- 'Perspicacity always does seem unfair, to others.'
- 'Well, what have you to say about the girls?—are they truthful?'
- 'Perfectly so—I should say remarkably so; a little too much for ordinary occasions. Miss Margaret is very plain-spoken.'
- 'That's just what I like. I do like girls to be natural and say what they mean. And the other, what did you think of her? for you are a capital judge, though sometimes a little hard in your criticisms.'
 - 'The other! Well, isn't she a little too pale?'
- 'I never thought of that. Perhaps it is owing to the contrast with her sister's brilliancy; for you will allow that Margaret is brilliant?'
- 'Yes; I allow it. Like an illumination of wax-candles that makes one's eyes ache!'

Johnnie was piqued. Where he admired he would not bear qualified praise.

'And the other,' he retorted, 'is like the candles when they are unlighted.'

'Yes; she does not make your eyes ache. Good-night, Johnnie; I'm going to bed.'

Keith did not retire to rest immediately. He sat for a long time thinking, seated in front of his bedroom fire, like a girl the night after her first ball; but his thoughts differed from a young girl's thoughts: they were serious, and somewhat sad. Presently he rose. took a key from his watch that lay on the dressing-table, and went to an old-fashioned bureau that stood in one corner of the room. This he carefully unlocked, and drew from an inner drawer a small writing-desk. Another key fitted this lock, a tiny key-ring which he wore on the little finger of his left hand. He brought the writing-desk towards the light of the candles, and opened it on the table. It contained a bundle of letters tied up with a blue ribbon, and beneath the letters was a small leather-case. He pressed the snap of the case, and disclosed a miniature. For some considerable time he contemplated the features of the portrait, while his own face took a hard and critical expression.

'As I thought, she is far more beautiful,' he muttered. 'It was sure to be some day, why not now?—haven't I done with regrets?'

He carelessly took up the packet of letters,

rustling their edges, then let it fall again almost immediately. He quietly closed the miniature-case, put it and the letters into an inner drawer of the bureau, and locked it. 'It is a new experience; I may never find another I like so well. Fate is my mistress; I have hitherto served her devotedly—she owes me a guerdon now.'

Thus thinking, he took up 'Les Maximes de la Rochefoucauld,' a book he studied assiduously, and which invariably accompanied him on his travels, and settled himself to an attentive perusal of its pages.



CHAPTER VI.

A LUNCHEON PARTY.

on Keith had induced a mysterious silence, she, on her part, maintained an extreme reserve with regard to her opinion of him.

'But now do say,' teased Margaret, when the curtains were drawn and the family sat over the cosy tea-table, 'which did you think the best-looking? For my part, I incline to Mr. Chester; he is so interesting, and interesting men are quite the ones.'

'The what ones?' asked Dorothy composedly.

'Well, the too awfully utter ones. You ought to know what that means, after all the *Punch* caricatures—I mean the men who give one thrills and tremors, and remind one of delightful Dick Turpin, and Byron, and all the rest.'

- 'Mr. Chester does not remind me of Dick Turpin.'
- 'No, naturally, you goose; I never saw Dick Turpin, but I can quite believe he has a history. Oh, mamma, please try to remember what it was—perhaps we shall find out tomorrow whether there is a ghost or a family secret.'
- 'I trust there are no ghosts,' said Mrs. Strait nervously.
- 'Of course not. Now, mamma, what have you lost?—your thimble? Oh, here it is. Really, you were quite presentable to-day; your collar was nearly straight, and that cap is very becoming. I was quite proud of you.'
- 'And I was quite ashamed of you, Margaret,' said her mother, smiling and colouring like a girl; 'how you did run on!'
- 'Well, wasn't it necessary? Dorothy sat as if in a dream, and you, poor dear, were quite flustered. I did not want them to think we had no manners. People in London always talk, I know, when visitors come; and if they can't think of any sensible remarks, they just talk nonsense, so you see I was doing quite the right thing.'
- 'Mamma, do you think it is quite doing "the right thing," as Margaret would say,'

interposed Dorothy, in her calm voice, 'for us to go and lunch with those young men to-morrow?—doesn't it seem a little forward?'

- 'Why, Dorothy,' broke in her sister, 'what a sneak you are! You know you asked to go!'
 - 'Not I! I never said a word.'
 - 'No; but your eyes did-volumes.'
- 'I should not for an instant countenance anything undignified or ill-judged on your part, you may be sure,' said Mrs. Strait, with dignity.

Being a woman of a singularly vacillating and timid temperament, she was subject to these fits of moral straightening, at which times she occasionally asserted herself with even outrageously violent determination. Dorothy was silent. She was well acquainted with these phases of reaction. They had been frequent from the time of the girl's childhood, when one day her mother would give her a doll to play with, and a month afterwards take it away again, while she child her sharply for wasting her time.

'Whatever anyone may say,' Margaret began, seeing that a silence had fallen over the trio, 'I intend to enjoy myself to-morrow. It isn't often, indeed, we get an outing, and I strongly advise you, Dorothy, to do the same. Even if you succeed in passing that Cambridge examination you are so full of, what will it avail you? Only enable you to take a governess's situation—a rather worse fate than that of a maid-of-all-work.'

'I might attain to something pleasanter than a governess's life—I mean something that would satisfy me better. And, besides, there is always the charm of the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake.'

'Bah! that won't do you much good. You will only get wrinkled and ugly. All woman who write are ugly—at least, most of them.'

'I don't want to write—I don't think I could write; but there are other things. However, we had better not discuss it,' she added despairingly, 'for we shall never agree.'

'No; I am happy to say we never shall,' and Margaret burst into a lively snatch of song.

The next morning Margaret rose betimes. She was generally somewhat idle, and fond of her ease, so that her mother and sister had frequently finished breakfast before she appeared; but this was an occasion of excitement well worth the trouble of surrendering a little comfort. She ran to the window and pushed aside the blind. The sun was shining brightly.

She clapped her hands in an ecstasy of thankfulness fervent as that of the true and devout sun-worshipper, and flew into the next room to awake her sister.

'Oh, Dorothy, it is fine! I was sure it would be fine. Wake up—do!'

For Dorothy, her golden hair unbound and streaming over the pillow, lay with the rosy light flushing her face, and her white arms crossed over a book.

'Just imagine reading, when there is such a day in store for us!'

Dorothy smiled. Perhaps the unturned pages of the book before her might have told a different tale, and given the denial to her sister's suppositions. She had not been studying, though she tried hard and conscientiously to grasp the nature of the royal prerogative, and parliamentary authority, about which she vainly puzzled her brains; she had not been studying, and she had been dreaming. Her dreams were not of rank and wealth, nor of good-looking young men and pleasant luncheonparties; but rather of a rounded, completed life—of a sympathetic communion of intellec-At this period of her life tual delights. intellect entered largely into Dorothy's conception of happiness. A clever man seemed to

her almost synonymous with a good man; for was not intellect something kingly, a possession and gift worthy of worship, an attribute of the 'All-knowing One?' And it was precisely this solitude of the intellect that she felt most deeply in the companionship of her mother and sister, who dismissed with a wave of the hand or an idle laugh the fancies and speculations which formed the very food of her She never put her feelings into words; she felt an entire incapacity for so doing. She was somewhat slow of speech, not from lack of ideas, but rather from superabundance. She therefore rose obediently at her sister's summons, and prepared to make her simple toilette.

'What shall we wear?' sighed Margaret. 'I have only that black serge with the scarlet I wore yesterday—my spring gown won't be finished for a week—and you, I suppose, will go in your eternal grey?'

'It is all I have,' said Dorothy simply, brushing out her long hair as she spoke.

'Well, good-bye; I must go and dress. Make yourself look as nice as you can, Dorothy.'

The recommendation was somewhat unnecessary, for two lovelier girls could scarcely be imagined than the sisters, as a few hours later, laughing and talking, they reached the door of Blackness Park. The black and scarlet serge, though it was not new, suited Margaret capitally; indeed, the value of red as a decorative colour, in our gloomy climate, is as yet not sufficiently recognised. It transforms dull skies and intensifies bright ones, producing an agreeable warmth and vivid sparkle, enhancing the most ordinary beauty. Dorothy, in her grey dress, looked very sweet and subdued; there was something dovelike and innocent in her appearance, yet when you looked into her steady eyes, their light half veiled beneath a far-away expression, you felt that it needed but one tiny spark to set them glowing and burning with the fire of passion that lay slumbering in their depths.

The Straits, contrary to custom, were ushered into no empty drawing-room, but the servant, in conformity with orders received, led them at once into the blue sitting-room, where sat the two young men.

Johnnie rose quickly from the writing-table—he had been busily entering items in his game-book. Mr. Chester occupied an armchair, and held a French novel open on his lap.

- 'Welcome!' he said, rising, with the mixture of foreign manner and English cordiality which made his address so attractive to most people. 'We were bored to death, hoping for your coming.'
- 'Are we late?' asked Margaret, with an air of indifference, pretending utter ignorance, though she knew that they had carefully timed their walk so as to arrive precisely five minutes after the luncheon-hour. Margaret had heard that it was countrified to be early, so she elaborately avoided all appearance of punctuality.
- 'I think not,' Keith answered politely; but the time of waiting for anything pleasant always appears long.'
- 'Is this your own special room?' said Mrs. Strait, who was examining the whip-racks and hunting-pictures on the wall. 'My husband was very fond of that kind of picture; he had some curious old prints.'
- 'Those pictures are of no value,' said Keith carelessly. 'They are only reminiscences of my college days. You see, I have not lived here for many years. In my palace at Venice I keep all that I really value.'
- 'A palace at Venice—how splendid!' whispered Margaret to Dorothy.

- 'A palace at Venice!' thought Dorothy; 'how romantic!'
- 'A palace at Venice!' said Mrs. Strait; 'isn't that a little damp?'

Keith smiled:

'No, but it's rather gloomy.'

After luncheon, Keith, turning to Dorothy, who during the meal had sat at his right hand, said:

- 'Now I want you to come with me; I have something to show you.'
- 'And the others?' Dorothy looked across to her sister, who sat by Mr. Coote; they were pulling crackers, and Margaret was laughing heartily. Keith understood now why Mrs. Maynard had called her noisy.
- 'They would not care for it,' he said to Dorothy. Then, in a louder voice, to her mother: 'Mrs. Strait, I am going to show your daughter some books; will you spare us for a moment?'

Mrs. Strait nodded assent. She had lunched well and enjoyed the port-wine, so that she felt exceedingly amiable.

Keith led the way. They paused a moment in the hall before the large picture of a boy on a pony.

'That was my father,' he briefly explained.

- 'I do not think you are very like him,' Dorothy remarked critically.
- 'No; I am much more foreign-looking. My mother was dark too, but not so dark as I am.'

They then proceeded upstairs and along the gallery, where he pointed out the Gainsborough, a charming rural figure; mounted a few steps, then winding suddenly round a corner, they entered a moderate-sized apartment.

'How do you like this room?' he asked, turning to catch a view of the expression on her face.

The deep bay-window commanded extensive view of the velvety lawn, the terraces adorned with plants and statues, and the lake with the fairy island in the distance. The sides of the room were furnished with book-shelves, occasionally broken by panels lined with velvet and looking-glass, and filled with china. The whole of the decorations consisted of books or china; they climbed to the ceiling, they touched the very ground. In the centre of the apartment stood a large round table, on which were piled more books, and albums full of pictures. Beside it stood a comfortable lounge, and in the window a writing-table and desk and a low armchair found their allotted place.

- 'It is Paradise!' said the girl, looking round longingly. 'No wonder you are clever.',
- 'You mean, if I have read all these books? Oh, but I haven't read half of them. Remember, I told you I believed I could show you something you would like.'
- 'Is this decoration your own idea?' she asked slowly, after a little.
- 'I designed the arrangement—yes. It was my mother's favourite room.'
 - 'And yours?' she added quickly.
- 'Well, no. I don't often come up here; I generally sit in the blue-room. But then I am seldom at Blackness at all.'
- 'I don't remember your ever being here. Why don't you come more often, possessing, as you do, such a beautiful place?'

'Why?'

Keith's face grew grave, and Dorothy thought she had made a mistake.

'I mean—of course, I have no business to ask why—but you do love this place, don't you?'

By this time they were standing at the window, and he motioned her to sit down in the easy-chair. He himself leant against the writing-table.

"Love," Miss Strait? That is a word I

never permit in my vocabulary. It is a misused word—a word for novelists. In the first place, one can't love a place. It is an inanimate object, and does not allow itself to be dissociated from its memories, its surroundings, its climate, and conditions. I am much afraid inclination, or convenience, or selfishness, sum up all our loves, if we choose to analyze them thoroughly. The man of the world soon learns to tolerate a great many things, and to love very few.'

- 'Are you a man of the world?' said the girl quietly. 'I suppose, as you have been a diplomat, you must be.'
- 'I am, emphatically. Do you approve of me less now that I have made this confession?'
 - 'No; only I am sorry.'
 - 'Why?'
- 'Oh, because a man of the world'—Dorothy breathed more quickly as she proceeded—'I think sometimes loses all the qualities that are best in a man.'
 - 'What qualities?'

Keith bent a little nearer, and his voice had a keen, searching tone in it.

'A man who can't love must be bitter, he must be selfish—I am sure you are not.'

- 'Just my condition. Go on, Miss Strait. I have seldom heard a more appropriate diagnosis of my case——'
- 'Oh, Mr. Chester,' said Dorothy, in much confusion, 'don't laugh at me. I have let my tongue run on; forgive me, pray.'
- 'I forgive you, but, my fair confessor, when a man is a man of the world, he cannot unman himself—it sounds like a riddle, doesn't it? I mean, he can't sophisticate himself—he can't plunge his soul into a new atmosphere, like hair into a dye, and make it of a different colour.'
 - 'He cannot, but God can surely——'
- 'Are you superstitious? because if you are, I feel almost as if the feeling were infectious.'
- 'To believe in God is not superstitious, surely,' she said, a trifle pained.
- 'Well, women believe in a God; men believe in themselves, or in the woman they love pro tem. That is the creed of a man of the world, unless perhaps he has even a broader creed, and believes in nothing at all. What would you do for a man then, Miss Strait?'
- 'I should pity him; but that is not your case, I am sure.'

At that instant laughing voices on the stairs reached their ears, and Mrs. Strait, Margaret, and Johnnie presently intruded their society upon them.

- 'What a nice room,' said Margaret, 'and what a quantity of looking-glasses and china! I can actually see how my gown fits at the back. I should like a room as full of glasses as this.'
- 'I knew we should find you here,' said Johnnie, proud of his perspicacity; 'the ladies are dying to go out and see the island. Will you come?'
- 'Yes, let us go,' Keith rejoined, in his old listless manner, making room for Dorothy to pass.





CHAPTER VII.

IDLE TALK.

HE whole party then adjourned to the garden and strolled towards the island, which received its due meed of admiration from the ladies.

'I should have tea here in the summer,' Margaret decided; 'and that rustic bench would do very well for the purpose.'

'I don't think it is a place for tea; but I should bring my books here,' Dorothy said.

'Yes; and you could dodge any visitors that way nicely, couldn't you?' put in Johnnie eagerly. 'Don't you hate afternoon visitors, Miss Strait?'

'Not always,' said Margaret, laughing. 'We did not hate you yesterday; but then, you know, we live rather like princesses in an enchanted castle, who sleep away their lives in perfect solitude.'

'What a horrid bore that must have been for the princess!' remarked Johnnie meditatively.

'The waking up was always induced by a kiss, wasn't it?' Keith said, in a quiet tone. 'Some people might like that—what is your opinion?' he added, walking a few steps away to where Dorothy stood in silence.

'I don't know,' she said, blushing a little. Dorothy's blushes were like the delicate tinting of a white flower by the rays of the setting sun. You looked, the blush was there; you looked again a moment after, and the blush was gone, and it only seemed as if the blood had flowed a little faster for a moment beneath the transparent skin. 'I don't know. Do you mean about the kiss, or the princess?'

'Both. Of course, there could be no doubt about the princess's feelings—they were unmixed felicity.'

'I suppose the kiss was merely the symbol. It means that love could bring one back to life, could wake all the sleeping faculties of one's nature.'

'Exactly so.'

'If the princess loved, she must have been happy!'

You think, then, that love could do all Vol. I.

that—could unlock the floodgates of happiness and transform a whole life?'

- 'Why not, if it is love?'
- 'You are sanguine, Miss Strait. I have never met with love like that!'
- 'Nor have I, for the matter of that,' she said, smiling. The others had walked on in their tour of admiration to inspect the boathouse. 'But I am sure there must be such a thing.'
- 'You see the prince gave the princess life; she had nothing to do with it. Perhaps all women—you, for instance—would not be so easily satisfied.'

This remark seemed to imply that an answer was expected, but none came. Dorothy was silent. It had occurred to her that Keith meant something more personal than the words in themselves conveyed; that he was in some subtle fashion seeking for her real sentiments under the guise of a hackneyed fairy-tale. Dorothy felt disinclined to reveal her real sentiments. She was flattered that Keith should try to elicit her opinion and seem to care about it; but, again, woman-like, she hesitated to gratify his curiosity.

'You don't answer, Miss Strait,' Keith again began, in a slightly more eager tone.

- 'Would you find happiness as the princess did?'
- 'A woman must accept what is offered her, I suppose?' Dorothy answered slowly; 'she is generally the recipient, not the giver. I should prefer to be the giver.'
- 'Which means that you have woman's rights propensities, and are reading for a Cambridge examination. You see, I know.'
 - 'How?' Dorothy looked dismayed.
- 'Never mind. You forget that I have been a diplomat, and it is his business to find out everything. You are ambitious, Miss Strait.'
- 'Yes,' briefly replied Dorothy, to whom petty prevarication was a science unknown.
 - 'Could you be ambitious for another?'
- 'I don't know.' Dorothy reflected. 'Under exceptional circumstances, perhaps.'
- 'And what would constitute exceptional circumstances?'
- 'Why, of course, a great love, like that of the princess in question.'
 - 'Could you feel that love?'
 - 'I don't know.'
- 'Miss Strait, have you never noticed what a large part those words, "I don't know," play in the English vocabulary? From high to

low, it is the answer you get everywhere; no Englishman ever commits himself, and the "I don't know," which means everything and nothing, is capable of driving a foreigner to distraction.'

'But if you persist in asking questions people can't answer, they must say "I don't know."'

'Which means that I have been impertinent.'

'No, but a little indiscreet.'

'The same thing. Miss Strait, I do not intend to make a long stay here.' Dorothy winced a little at these words. 'And there are many subjects I should like to talk to you about. I have not been in the habit of associating much with English girls—certainly not with girls like yourself, and I would give a great deal to hear your opinions on some things.'

'In short, you would like to study me and laugh at me,' said Dorothy, with unaccountable bitterness.

'Dieu m'en garde!—I mean rather to learn to appreciate you. Can't you believe that there is some kind of respect for goodness left in me, even though I am a man of the world?'

'Oh yes! indeed, Mr. Chester, I beg your pardon.'

'Not at all. We are talking freely, unconventionally, on this occasion, and I like you to say just what you think. You interest me strangely, Miss Strait.'

Dorothy was silent. She did not know exactly what a remark of this sort, coming from a man of the world, meant. Keith interested her, too, but she supposed the expression of interest to him meant only a vague compliment.

Her silence seemed to pique him. He quickly began again.

- 'A fashionable girl would have taken that as a pretty speech, Miss Strait.'
- 'Would she? I have never been used to pretty speeches; so you see I am at a loss how to recognise them.'
- 'You must let me see a great deal of you while I am here,' Keith added impetuously. 'Do, for my sake.'

His accent was unmistakable now; he evidently meant to convey eagerness. Dorothy could not exactly have defined her sensations. Her vanity was gratified, but the presence of the strange, handsome man beside her seemed in some fashion to benumb her thoughts; she felt paralyzed and fascinated, like the small bird that cowers in the corner of the drowsy

serpent's cage, and without a struggle submits to the fate it fears.

'May I come and see you to-morrow?'

Dorothy nodded; she dared not trust herself to speak, but hastened on to join her mother, who just then approached, primed with a small battery of customary civilities.

'We must thank you for your hospitality,' said Mrs. Strait gracefully—she could be graceful when she was not in a hurry—'and for the glimpse of your beautiful garden. We have enjoyed it all exceedingly: it has been a great treat—quite an event; but it is getting late, and we must, I fear, now say good-bye.'

'I am sorry you must go already. We will walk as far as the gate with you,' said Keith, the proposal being immediately seconded by Johnnie, who was now on excellently familiar terms with Margaret.

The afternoon's adventures seemed like a dream to the girls when, once more at home, they gathered round the supper-table.

'Cold mutton!' said Margaret, gazing discontentedly at the joint before her. 'No, I can't eat any to-night. I have the reminiscence of those lamb-cutlets still before me. I think it is almost worse to go out and see what lovely things there are in the world,

and then come home to cold mutton. Those young men, now—there is paradise if you like—they need never do anything but what they please.'

'Is Mr. Coote rich then?' asked Mrs. Strait, putting down her knife and fork, and looking across at her daughter with a puzzled, anxious expression.

'Gracious, mamma! I don't know. He is in the Guards, I believe.'

'He seemed smitten with you, Margaret. Give me the pickles, dear.'

'Mamma, you always spoil one's fun. Your mind runs on marriage, while mine runs on pleasure. I want to enjoy and amuse myself, and for that purpose Mr. Coote is as good as another. He talks charmingly; he told me all about his hunting, and how many head of game he shot at Christmas, and described all the balls he went to last season. That's better, at least, than crewel-work and Mrs. Parkinson's tea.'

'Margaret, if you are so flippant you will never marry.'

'I don't want to marry at present. Why, you talk as if I were a man with a profession.'

'Marriage is a woman's profession, my dear.'

'Then, mamma, all I can say is, you did not draw a prize in the profession: a poor literary man and an old house in a village, that's a nice sort of result.'

'You must marry, for my sake, Margaret.'
The girl paused a moment in her idle chatter.

Visions of genteel poverty, of the mother sitting darning through the watches of the wintry night by the child's bedside, and the fitful glimpses the child, warm and cosy in her blankets, had caught of a bending weary figure stitching industriously, of her father's worn coat and long illness, of the faded drawing-room chintzes, rose before her and filled her heart with an unwonted tenderness for the much-tried if querulous woman, who in her old age said to her daughter, 'You must marry, for my sake.' The hasty words dropped from her lips, and she said quietly:

'But you don't even know if Mr. Coote is a good sort of person.'

'I can see it in his countenance. As for riches, why,' she added sadly, carefully folding up her napkin and passing it through an ivory ring, 'why—there—widows mustn't be choosers.'

'Beggars, mamma,' corrected Margaret, laughing.

'It's all the same, my dear. Widows and beggars are both called blessed in the Bible.'

'Am I like my father in looks?' asked Margaret, who had risen, and now amused herself by swaying her slender neck to and fro and catching side-glimpses of herself in the looking-glass.

'Yes; indeed,' said Mrs. Strait, as her faded eyes took a brighter lustre, 'you resemble him most.'

'Then my father must have been a very handsome man,' cried Margaret, continuing her manœuvres in front of the glass, and thereby rousing the usually placid Dorothy to say:

'Margaret, you behave like a monkey.'

'Ah, it's very well for you to do the Puritan.' Here Margaret sat down in order to continue her diatribe more conveniently. 'But I have discovered that you are just as vain as I am, miss, though you are quieter and less demonstrative. You contrived to monopolize Mr. Chester to-day entirely. I saw your by-play, and really thought it did a simple bookworm like you infinite credit. I am not sure I shall not pose as the shy ingénue

next time. It seems to be successful; but no, the Diana Vernon style of beauty is my line. Don't you think so, mamma?'

'Diana of the Ephesians, my dear? I am sure she wasn't proper.'

'Diana Vernon, I said. As if I should wish to resemble a brass goddess! After all, I don't care for Mr. Chester, Dorothy. You are quite welcome to his attentions; he is too pale, and I think he is a humbug, though he certainly has a lovely profile. Honestly, I congratulate you. You played the part of a flirt to-day to perfection—quite in the orthodox style—downcast eyes and pretty propriety.'

'Margaret, you are insupportable.'

Dorothy coloured violently.

'Why do you blush, if I have not hit the right nail on the head? That is the worst of transparent skins like yours. One can read all your thoughts in your cheeks. Mine, I am happy to say, are not such tell-tales.'

'Are you tired, mamma?'

Dorothy moved round to where her mother sat, looking wan and weary, and laid her hand on her shoulder.

'No, my child; not more tired than usual.'

'And when are those two charmers coming again, do you know?' asked Margaret, languidly examining the tips of her nails.

There was a silence. Then Dorothy, in a timid, quick voice, said, addressing the remark to her mother:

- 'Mr. Chester said he would call here tomorrow.'
- 'Well, I must say'—Margaret crumbled her bread into little balls, and began to set them up pyramidally, like a bulwark, in front of her on the table-cloth—'I must say you do not lose time; that will be three days running we shall have had the happiness of seeing Mr. Chester. Mamma, Dorothy at least has profited by your matrimonial lessons.'
- 'Oh, Margaret!' Dorothy's quick voice had a tone of pain in it, and her eyes filled with tears.
- 'Don't be a goose, Dorothy! I'm delighted. "When the heir returneth, then the bell will toll." Is it not extraordinary how music always seems to fit in exactly with one's mood? Now, my dear Dorothy, for goodness' sake. don't take up that big book'—for her sister had seized a volume of history, and retired to another part of the room. 'Please don't read. You should not be cross, dear. I didn't mean

anything, only it is so extremely nice to have something to make fun about.'

'Pray go on, if it amuses you,' said her sister resignedly, 'though I think you might find some more interesting topic of conversation.'

Margaret perceived that she had tried Dorothy's patience sufficiently, and even 'fun' ceases to afford amusement when the person ridiculed neither retaliates nor shows anger; so she amiably began to read aloud little extracts from the newspaper which lay near her, the result of which was that Mrs. Strait soon fell asleep, and dreamed of burglaries, dynamite explosions, and girls committing suicide for love—the mental food on which in her waking state she had been regaled while Dorothy quietly drifted away into dreams and imaginings. She wove for herself quite a pretty romance, of which Keith was the hero. Who else indeed could be the hero. seeing he was almost the first young man she had seen and conversed with familiarly, and quite the first, except young Wigram (he was only a boy), who had deferentially inquired for her views, and informed her, that she interested him extremely? In addition, he was versed in the ways of diplomacy—presumably also in woman's ways—and had a kind of possessive personality about him, which seemed to claim and appropriate for himself any young girl on whom he deigned to bestow his attention. Dorothy even ventured to think there might be a charm in the awakening of the princess, about which her opinion had been asked, especially if the kiss came from two expressive lips shaded by a dark moustache.

'Dorothy, what are you dreaming about? Mamma has gone fast asleep, and the fire is out.'

Dorothy, thus suddenly admonished, jumped up rapidly with a sense of extreme guilt, and busied herself with the coal-scuttle, while Margaret, laying down the newspaper, laughed immoderately.



CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE PARSONAGE.

RS. MAYNARD was considerably exercised in her mind, about this period. At first she had felt a trifle annoyed when she heard (as of course in so small a village was the inevitable result) that the Miss Straits had been invited to lunch at Blackness, in preference to herself. Her vanity was hurt at the implied disparagement of her personal charms, besides which, she was acutely disappointed at losing a rare pleasure; for Sophie Maynard loved luxury above all things. Her life was a daily penance of small duties—early rising, teaching in the school, assisting at children's teas, and visits to wretched cottages—from all of which, including as they did the accessories of dirt. discomfort, and poverty, Sophie shrank as a white cat does from wetting her feet on a muddy road. The advent of two independent, rich, and agreeable young men seemed to promise a vista of pleasures and indulgences, of which poor Sophie, as a rule, only received a small share; and she could not resist a momentary impulse of envy and dislike for the more highly favoured Strait girls. Under the influence of this deception, she sat down and wrote a letter to her dearest friend, Miss Alicia Twyne, whom she had met at a boarding-school, explaining, complaining, and prattling about her neighbours' affairs, in a truly feminine spirit.

Some days subsequently, Mrs. Maynard received an answer to her outpourings. Miss Alicia wrote a full-fledged lady-like hand, with straggling tails and interminably crossed t's, and she affected very thin roseate paper, which she crossed and recrossed, thereby doubling the excitement and labour of her readers; for Miss Alicia had a vein of rippling, biting gossip, which resembled the piquant effect of currie-powder delicately introduced into a dish of broiled chicken.

When Mrs. Maynard, after breakfast, unfolded the precious epistle (her husband was out on parish matters, and having given the

cook her orders, Sophie was free to indulge herself as she pleased for half an hour), she saw at once that it was longer than usual, and most entrancingly crossed and written over, up and down and round the corners. After glancing over numerous topics of more or less interest to her correspondent, Miss Alicia thus continued:

'With regard to your disappointment, dear, for which I feel as every true woman must naturally feel for her friend's disappointment (but is not life made up of disappointments? a mere web of deceitfulness, as a clever man once said to me), it is, perhaps, not so great a one as you might think. I have heardmind, you I only say I have heard, for as a woman it is not my business to retail gossip about men, and after all it may really be scandal, and not only harmless gossip—but I have heard, and on very good authority too, that Mr. Chester is a monster. Well, dear. I knew you would start. But listen a little He is beautiful, I believe, fascinfurther. ating, as monsters always are (did not Faust betray Marguerite, and leave her—as we know from having seen it at the opera-in a grey dress, with all her hair down, to lie on a bundle of dirty straw?—for my part, I

wonder how Nilsson and Patti can bear to lie on that horrid straw, and wear so unbecoming and dingy a dress), and women stick up for him as well as men; but there is an awful story about him. It seems that Blackness was heavily mortgaged, and he was very poor in the days when he lived abroad as a young diplomat. In society at Rome he met a beautiful American with a great deal of money, Miss Ida E. Phaer (you know Americans always seem to have two Christian names), and they were engaged to be married. It was thought he did not care much for her, though she was passionately attached to him (girls with money invariably are fools—thank goodness I have nothing but my brains and my looks, and both are rather exceptionally good), when suddenly, without warning, she died. It was a mysterious kind of death people talked of heart disease, and what not. Suffice it the poor thing died, and there was a whisper (such a whisper that the diplomat left Rome pretty quickly) that Mr. Chester had used unfair means to possess himself of It seems that abroad people her money. fight rather shy of him, but in England, of course, he is scarcely known, though I have no doubt that in a little while his story will be quite familiar here. Of course, my dear, that is no reason why you should not go to his house; only I would, in your case, be careful about chocolate-creams, as one never knows what such a man may be up to.'

When Mrs. Maynard had read this letter, she folded it again carefully, and sat with it on her lap for some moments, plunged in thought. She was sore and angry at Keith's apparent neglect, and here was an opportunity for revenge of a most satisfactory kind given into her very hand. It would be sweet to have an entirely new piece of gossip to retail amongst her cronies; it would be sweet to annoy Keith, and, above all, to injure him in the eyes and opinion of Dorothy, who she felt quite sure was the cause of his indifference. Dorothy, whom she most unnecessarily envied because she was so beautiful and so simple—a kind of stinging commentary upon Mrs. Maynard's own discontented, restless spirit. Sophie was not positively unkind. She would have cried had she really caused a twinge of moral or physical pain to anyone, though she would best have understood the physical pain; but the gratifying of a piece of spite, when that gratification was so pleasantly prepared for her, was really too delightful an exercise to be

foregone. How should she open her batteries? What was to be her first offensive attack? Sophie poised her little head on one side and pondered deeply. Her husband? What a nuisance dreadfully religious people were, whose minds were for ever balancing their heavenly debit and credit account, and who could rarely force themselves to take any interest in more unimportant and mundane matters!

Sophie respected her husband most devoutly; she loved him too, partly out of gratitude because he had taken her from a very miserable position and given her the whole affection of a strong nature and the cultured elegance of a pleasant home; but she could not resist playing her own little game of intrigue and cunning whenever she had the opportunity, even though she was fully aware that in so doing she risked, in case of discovery, the loss of his esteem.

As we have seen, Mrs. Parkinson believed in her innate goodness; Mr. Maynard saw in her little whims nothing but a childish ebullition of high spirits; and Sophie considered her own nature as eminently good and amiable, though not perhaps so tiresome and watery as that of people who set up to be saints. Yet the little woman, with her cat-like love of mischief and carelessness of consequences, was fully capable of organizing a very pretty scheme of ruin to any of her friends against whom she bore a grudge. On this occasion Sophie determined to act very warily, and to gain over her husband to her views.

The clergyman scarcely repressed a sigh of relief that afternoon when, after a weary round of visits, he neared the white house with the little green veranda, and felt with satisfaction that, in the absence of any special saint's-day service, he might spend a quiet evening, his feet encased in slippers, by his own fireside, in the company of his pretty wife. There was a volume of the 'Bampton Lectures,' to the digesting of which he had been looking forward, and his recreations were, as a rule, so thoroughly well earned by a fair amount of hard work, that he could enjoy them with a double zest. He paused at the entrance to his gate, and looked back down the winding village street. The horizon was tinged with ruddy light, which threw a bright reflection into every petty roadside pool; above, the tinv crescent moon showed like a silver streak, and the voices of the children were borne gently towards him on the lightly stirring air.

Peace ruled the world at this sunset hour, and the worthy clergyman felt his own soul at Within, Sophie herself was waiting—his own dear little wife. The note of rejoicing was checked by his fear of inordinate love and human idolatry, which offends the heavenly Father by offering to a weak woman the wor ship only rightly to be rendered to Him. Maynard was a very good man, and, like all good men, he had a very tender consciencea conscience that pricked him incessantly, and made him perform a million penances which remained hidden mysteriously from the eyes of the outer world, who only knew him as an excellent and devoted priest, with a black beard and a deep sonorous voice.

Sophie had made a little toilette this evening, in anticipation of her husband's return. It was not much of a toilette, regarded from the aspect of a fashionable lady, whose practice it is, two or three times a day, to change one splendid Parisian dress for another splendid Parisian dress; but Charles Maynard's quick eye caught the difference at once, and he loved his wife even more fondly for her intention to please. Sophie wore only a plain black silk gown, such a gown as might be worn by a governess or a housekeeper in a grand house; but she

wore it with an air. The upper part of the dress was heart-shaped, and from amidst ample folds of black lace gleamed her white neck, and from amidst similar folds gleamed two bare white arms, and in her bosom reposed a deep red camellia. Her bright eyes were brighter than ever, and full of smiles as she hastened towards her husband.

- 'Are you cold, Charles? Let me help you off with your coat.'
- 'Kiss me first, Sophie. How good it is to be at home again!'
 - 'Charles, I have a surprise for you.'

It would have astonished people who thought Mr. Maynard unsentimental, had they beheld how the fascinating Sophie, twining her arms round her husband's neck, pressed him down on to a low chair and settled on his lap, stretching her neat little feet on to the fender-stool.

- 'What do you like very much? Come now, think.'
- 'Something for dinner?' said the clergyman, his deep voice turning quite mellow. 'Let's see—it isn't a saint's day—oh, could it be——'
 - 'Yes, it is-pancakes!'

And pancakes it was; for Mrs. Maynard

knew that her husband's proclivities lay in the direction of so harmless and monastic a dish as pancakes, and meaning to keep him in a good temper, had ordered it for his dinner.

'Now run away, dear, and wash your hands—and be quick.'

The pancakes had been eaten and duly pronounced excellent. Mr. Maynard smoked his pipe, and his wife placidly worked crochet by his side. Externally, she was the image of repose and contentment, but inwardly she was fuming and fussing and wildly turning over in her mind the best way to introduce the all-absorbing topic, when Charles assisted her (men occasionally have a trick of doing this as though by some mysterious second-sight they could read thoughts), by saying somewhat suddenly:

- 'I met Mr. Chester and his friend to-day. They were walking with the Miss Straits.'
- 'Oh!'—Sophie laid her hand coaxingly on her husband's arm—'that reminds me. What do you think of Mr. Chester?'
- 'He is a nice young fellow, I think; I am very glad he is going to take his proper position in the county.'
 - 'His proper position? What is that?'
 - 'Really, Sophie, you look as if you did not

know that he was a landed proprietor, with a considerable income. That surely constitutes a position.'

'How did he make his money, Charles?'

Mrs. Maynard had slipped on to the fur rug, and sat now at her husband's feet, with her arm resting on his knee, so that she could look straight into his face. When you are playing a game of brag or acute word-fencing, it is always well to look your antagonist in the face—so diplomats say. You can read there, unless he is a great adept, exactly what is the next most desirable move.

- 'Make his money?' echoed the clergyman, somewhat puzzled. 'He inherited it, I suppose.'
- 'When a pretty young lady, who is in love with a man, leaves him a fortune, is that called inheriting it?'
 - 'No. What do you mean?'
- 'Well, dear'—here Mrs. Maynard pulled out of her pocket the trump-card, Miss Alicia's letter—'I heard all about Mr. Chester to-day. If it interests you, I will read it.'
 - 'Who is your correspondent, Sophie?'
- 'Alicia—dear Alicia Twyne. You are aware that she always knows everything.'

'Humph!' said Mr. Maynard; 'she is a gossip.'

'Alicia is a most trustworthy woman,' said Sophie severely, 'a very clever woman. Lady Strutforth said so, and she is an excellent judge; for her daughter married an Archbishop's son, so she has every opportunity of conversing with remarkable people.'

'Well, what does Alicia say?'

Then Mrs. Maynard, with great gusto, poured forth her little budget of scandal. Mr. Maynard listened, but offered no remark. When she had concluded, she said, 'Well, Charles?' interrogatively.

- 'Well!' he answered.
- 'What shall we do?'
- 'Do!-what should we do?'

'Charles, are you—an upright clergyman, a man of principle—going to allow Dorothy Strait to run her head into a noose? Do you not see that this man, this adventurer, is simply making up to her? I noticed it at once.'

'It is not my business, Sophie. Dorothy has her mother, and she has no money; therefore Mr. Chester's designs need not necessarily be mercenary. Besides, we are not his judges, nor can we verify Alicia's accusations.'

- 'They are not accusations, they are facts.'
- 'It is possible; but we should be careful of hastily condemning our neighbours. Remember the text, "First cast out the beam that is in——"
- 'Now, Charles, if you are going to knock me on the head with a text, there is no more to be said; but I fancied you had a grain of Christian sympathy for Dorothy, and would not like her to go straight to destruction.'
- 'My dear,' quietly said her husband, laying one hand tenderly on her head, and with the other lifting her face to his as he spoke, 'are we not rather making mountains out of molehills? We have barely spoken to Mr. Chester; he behaved with great propriety in calling on me immediately after his arrival, and he has visited the Straits a couple of times. Now there comes a letter from a young lady, who, like other young ladies, may be given to slight exaggeration, and we begin to speculate, and talk of marriage and destruction at once. Is it not, to say the least of it, a little premature?'
- 'Charles, you are always arguing one down as if you were preaching a sermon; but I still think it is your duty (and you know you

always talk of not shirking duties)—your distinct and positive duty—to enlighten Mrs. Strait as to the character of her daughter's lover.'

'Little lecturer! Is that the whole duty of man?'

Mr. Maynard tried smilingly to draw his wife down on to his knee. But her blood was up and her patience was exhausted -she had shot her little arrow, and it had fallen short of the mark. She would permit no more caresses. Caresses were a bait or a reward: they were not to be lightly treated as an ordinary luxury. So Mr. Maynard presently sat somewhat sadly alone, and finished his pipe, with the reflection that Solomon's verdict was the true one, and that women's ways were decidedly inscrutable and shifty. Upstairs, charming Sophie, with a pout, took off her finery and shook down her wavy hair in front of her dressing-glass, wishing heartily that her husband were not so truly calm, clear-judging, and righteous a man, careful to avoid the smallest piece of injustice or want of charity, for in that case the management of a husband would prove a more easy task.



CHAPTER IX.

MRS. MAYNARD SPEAKS HER MIND.

RULY enough, as Mrs. Maynard had enviously observed, the fortunate Strait girls had for the past few days enjoyed the uninterrupted companionship of the two young men from Blackness. Scarcely four-and-twenty hours elapsed without some communication passing between the respective households. Chester had observed that Mrs. Strait was fond of flowers, would she accept some liliesof-the-valley from the Blackness hot-house? or, 'Mr. Chester had the honour to send a book of references about which Miss Dorothy had inquired;' or, 'Perhaps Miss Margaret might like to try the new song, brought by bearer.' These and similar messages were perpetually

being carried backwards and forwards by a groom on horseback or a servant on foot. The distance of a mile is a mere trifle in the country, though the same mile traversed every day is apt to prove wearisome, as the Blackness servants often grumblingly Sometimes the answer was delayed. $\mathbf{declared}.$ and then Keith usually called for it himself. He had fallen into a fashion of dropping in about the mystic hour of five o'clock, for a cup of tea and a chat. The little maid. Sarah, now received him with a smile and a familiarity bred of constant use, and showed him into the drawing-room at once, without hesitation, or the formality of inquiring his name. And then, in the green-panelled room, with the scent of the lilies-of-the-valley from his own hot-house making the air fragrant, he would find Mrs. Strait knitting by the fireside, and Dorothy coming forward with a lovely blush, and bent inclination of the lashes, to give him her hand and a shy welcome. Occasionally Margaret was present, but she already seemed to recognise her sister's superior right to Mr. Chester's attentions, and she therefore commonly absented herself, remarking with a laugh, that 'Two are company, but three are none.'

Dorothy was very happy. In the midst of her morning's reading there would come before her, now, the look of two deep blackfringed eyes, or the sound of a clear, half-mocking voice would rise to her ears, and fill her with a blissful tremor. She did not permit the interruption to her serious task to be of long duration, but while it lasted it brought the brightest dream of quiet happiness.

The studies themselves seemed gilded with a new glory, and their difficulties became less arduous as she reflected each day that fresh happiness, her new happiness, would come in the afternoon, in the person of the handsome man who held entire possession of her thoughts. Gradually she learned to listen for his ring at the door. Gradually she longed for it; presently she felt as if it were a part of her life. And with this sensation there ensued no wild throbs of passion, no dark troublesome moods, but the most heavenly sensation of peace and contentment and satisfaction. And the experience lent new charms to her beauty. She had always been perfect in form and features. but there came now to her eyes a serene glow as from the soul within, to her lips a readier smile, to all her motions a fuller grace and more exquisite softness. She had formerly looked like a beautiful statue, now she was a beautiful woman.

Needless to say that so experienced a man as Keith noticed this also, and that the transformation in Dorothy increased his sense of power. He knew so exactly where and when to strike the right chord, how to preserve the exact balance of feeling, how to increase, without over-exciting, feelings of attraction and emotion, how to maintain his influence while appearing only humble and adoring.

Dorothy had never seen anyone in the least resembling him. He had taken her imagination and intellect captive at once, and he was now on the high-road to take her heart captive. Unconsciously she felt that once he possessed her heart, she must drift rudderless into his power.

It is the fashion to sneer at young love, at girls' love, and to compare it unfavourably with the more mature and sedate love of a later period; but the pain is as acute, the longing as intense, the disappointment as grievous, the joy as exhilarating, in the fair young soul, still fresh from the hand of God and more finely attuned for suffering or happiness, as in the heart of one who has gone through the furnace, who has loved and lost

and outlived hope, till it can only snatch wildly and despairingly at the last shred of happiness that life seems to offer. The young may forget more quickly, and fortunately for their future prospects they do forget; but depend upon it, they suffer as grievously as their elders. At present, however, Dorothy was but turning over the leaves of the prologue of her life. She enjoyed, but she did not suffer. Margaret had ceased to tease her about Mr. Indeed, Margaret herself was too Chester. deeply engrossed with her own endeavours to captivate Mr. Coote, or rather, as he was already captivated, to draw the chains tighter, and to bind the prisoner more securely.

Thus there did not seem a single drawback to Dorothy's happiness. She was full of an airy lightness of heart which set her singing softly to herself, when, on the day following Mrs. Maynard's reception of the letter from Miss Alicia Twyne, Dorothy walked down to call, by her mother's request, at the Vicarage. There was nothing much in common between the two women. Dorothy had a fashion, most people called it a fault, of keeping aloof from people unless she felt drawn towards them by a strong bond of sympathy; and the only thing she and Mrs. Maynard possessed in unison

was their beauty. A young lady whose head ran on culture, and the respective merits of a Whig or Tory Government, was not likely to take much interest in the pretty, frivolous Sophie, with her small aims and her chattering correspondents. Dorothy did not express her feelings in so many words; she was always gentle and courteous, saying precisely the right thing, and bringing her mind down to the fal-lals of dress and the rival modes of trimming a skirt, yet by a subtle intuition Mrs. Maynard felt that she did not succeed in arresting the mind of her listener. It was bad enough when clergymen preached, for the exercise was naturally a part of their work; but when young girls sat silently, a kind of meek protest against vanity, it became truly irritating. The sentiments entertained by Mrs. Maynard towards Dorothy were therefore strictly only those of a careful toleration which might at any moment degenerate into enmity. She received her, however, most graciously. Mrs. Maynard professed a great contempt for people who had not good manners.

'Ah, Dorothy, my dear,' she exclaimed, stretching out both her hands as she came into the room (after keeping her visitor waiting for some minutes), with a rustle and rush of

garments. 'I am very glad to see you. I hope you did not mind waiting.'

'Oh no, indeed,' said Dorothy, taking her place beside her on the tiny sofa. 'I suppose you were busy.'

'I was washing my hands, my dear, and making use of some eau de Cologne to get rid of the smell of those school-children I have been teaching. Pah! the schoolroom was stuffier than ever to-day. I am sure I ought to go straight to heaven, for I have endured enough purgatory here, looking after all those horrid brats. You are lucky; you never do it.'

'No, mamma will not let me; she is afraid of infection.'

The thought crossed Dorothy's mind, as she glanced down at the folds of her spotless grey gown, that perhaps she might be shirking a duty. Dorothy was a great stickler for duty, though not exactly what is called a religious enthusiast. She had attended the Vicar's early service because it seemed to her a fitting beginning of the day, and because she felt a kind of respectful pleasure in helping the good man by her countenance and support; yet she had dutifully given up the practice without a murmur at her mother's request, when Mrs. Strait said she dreaded

the chill morning air for her, and did not like to wait breakfast. Nevertheless, Dorothy sometimes fancied that her life was a trifle too self-centred, and that some kind of safetyvalve in the shape of charity might not be amiss. On this occasion she looked admiringly at Mrs. Maynard.

'It is very good of you to do these disagreeable things, as you do not like them,' she said.

'Charles likes it,' Mrs. Maynard answered, with a little gush of sentiment. 'And if it pleases him, I suppose it is right. Charles is very fond of you,' she added, with a keen glance at the young girl beside her.

'Is he?' Dorothy responded, somewhat surprised.

'He always speaks so kindly of you. In fact, we had almost a little quarrel about you last night.'

'About me?' Dorothy suddenly felt uneasy. She dreaded lest anything should happen to disturb her present condition of felicity.

'About you. We were agreed in the main, but men have such strange ideas, you know—Charles especially; he is not like other people. He shrinks from paining anyone until he

really sometimes almost does harm by his timidity.'

'It is better to be silent on occasions than to speak too much,' said Dorothy, feeling a conviction that whatever Mr. Maynard thought must be right and kind.

'Ah! my dear,' Mrs. Maynard laughed softly, 'no one can accuse you of being a talker. You are as shy and quiet as a mouse. But I am different. I am staunch and loyal to my friends; and if I see that there is some calamity threatening them, I must try and avert it by speaking out. Charles wanted me to keep silence, but I have determined to do my duty. Dorothy dear, you are in love!'

Dorothy Strait's large eyes fastened with a kind of wonder on the countenance of the speaker.

'I see you are surprised,' Sophie continued, unabashed, 'that I should have read you so clearly. My dear, affection is very sharp-sighted. Don't be ashamed; all girls fall in love, and out again too, pretty quickly, sometimes.'

'Oh! Mrs. Maynard,' Dorothy at last succeeded in saying with a gasp, 'you do exceed the privileges of acquaintance.'

'Dorothy, if I say this'—Sophie grasped

the girl's hand with a caressing movement, one of those feline impulses which she had never known to fail in their effect—'it is because, child, I know what it is. I also have been in love—it is an involuntary condition.'

- 'I am not in love,' Dorothy said; but she said the words feebly, and Sophie knew the victory was hers.
- 'No, dear, of course not; people never confess those things. All I wished to impress upon you was, that it is wise to be careful *how* one falls in love. Men are deceitful, Dorothy.'
- 'What do you mean?' Dorothy blanched visibly.
- 'Don't be frightened, child; but I would mistrust, if I were you, good-looking young men with romantic histories and large fortunes like Mr. Chester, for instance.'
- 'Mr. Chester is nothing to me.' Dorothy's heart sank down, down, and she felt sick.
- 'He may be, though. Dorothy, don't prevaricate—he is paying you attention, and you like him.'
 - 'Is it a crime to like the society of friends?'
- 'No, indeed—and you are young, therefore unsuspicious, but——'
 - 'Mrs. Maynard, you have some motive in

all this; what is it?' Dorothy had recovered her composure, and now drew herself up proudly.

'I have heard terrible things of Mr. Chester. Any woman who marries him must do it with her eyes open.'

'I don't believe it,' broke in Dorothy, with impetuosity. Her heart was speaking now, and she had ceased to care whether Mrs. Maynard guessed her secret or not. 'Why do you slander him?'

'I never slander. I have a letter here,' and Mrs. Maynard gently tapped her pocket, 'which contains the facts: he obtained his money by dishonest practices from a young lady who died.'

'A woman loved him and left him her money—I can see no fault in that.' But even as she spoke, an unreasoning jealousy of the woman who had had the happiness to render him a vital service passed through her soul. She herself had no money, nothing to give, nothing to sacrifice—it must be all acceptance on her part.

Mrs. Maynard gave her a searching look. The poisoned barb had, she believed, done its work; further meddling on her part could not improve matters—yeast must be given

time to ferment—but the result of her pungent speeches was certain.

- 'I cannot dispute, dear, about your friends,' she said lightly. 'I only hope you will not suffer—at any rate, you are warned. Mr. Chester is no doubt very fascinating, and that is just what constitutes the danger. If he were less fascinating, a nice, clever girl like you would never waste a thought on him.'
- 'I am not aware that I have wasted any thoughts on him,' said Dorothy drily. She was no longer angry, but the subject wearied her; it sounded such idle nonsense.
- 'No, dear, you are too wise for foolish thoughts,' remarked Mrs. Maynard with gentle sarcasm, the kind of aggravating pin-pricking process which easy-tempered people use to lash more fiery natures into passion, and generally with exceeding satisfactory results. Dorothy was not fiery, however; though she felt deeply, she could not retort quickly.
- 'You know I am not wise, Mrs. Maynard,' she replied. 'Why do you sneer at me?'
- 'Sneer at you, my beauty!' and Sophie now nudged her amiably. She was in a good temper, for she was getting all she wanted. 'Sneer at you—oh no! Forget all I have said,

dear, if it annoys you. Only don't be rash with that man, and keep to your books; they are perfectly satisfactory—don't you think so? Books are a great solace.'

'I thought you were not fond of reading?'

'Oh yes, poetry and novels; novels are capital for the spirits. I recommend you a course of Dickens.'

The conversation then dropped to more ordinary topics, and Dorothy withdrew as rapidly as was consistent with politeness; for Sophie's caresses seemed utterly hateful and false to her, and her most innocent words and childlike graces to be impregnated with acid bitterness when viewed through the medium of Dorothy's distorted vision. As soon as she had shaken herself free from last words and affectionate embraces, she fled quickly down the street into the country beyond. Her usually composed countenance was disturbed, her pulses were beating. Was it indeed so, that a few words of blame applied to Mr. Chester—perfectly causeless blame, as she believed—had power to cause her acute misery? If she had faith (Dorothy tried to think of Keith as unworthy, and was proud to recognise her inability to do so)—if she had faith, why feel annoyance? she reasoned with herself. He was not, never

could be, anything else but a friend, a pleasant sympathetic companion. Of course, some day he would go away again, would leave her. Well—in that case there was the Cambridge examination. Suddenly she realized vividly that the prospect of distinction and intellectual honours paled into insignificance when regarded in the cold light of Keith's departure. Dorothy sighed. Had she overrated the advantages of intellect?





CHAPTER X.

KEITH SPEAKS.

HE walked on unconsciously between the bright green hedges just bursting into leaf; the air had the sweet smell of upturned earth, tiny white clouds chased one another across the clear blue sky, and a million strange phantasies traversed her brain. The lane along which her footsteps led her was one of those numerous narrow roads, both silent and unfrequented, that abound in England. As far as the eye could reach, there was nothing to be seen but fields, some green with grass, some mown and newly ploughed, their boundaries here and there more clearly defined by hedgerow-trees, or by woods whence the cluck of pheasants resounded. At her feet violets turned their meek heads towards the sun, and

golden primroses twinkled in the leafy banks. She gradually slackened her rapid pace, feeling her habitual placidity and calm restored, when at the turn of the road, with a suddenness that almost took away her breath, she encountered Mr. Chester. He bowed and looked pleased.

'Where are you going to, Miss Strait? May I turn and walk a little way with you?'

The temptation was irresistible. Dorothy wished keenly to prove for herself that he was incapable of unworthy actions.

- 'I am going nowhere. Does such a prospect appeal to you?'
- 'Under the circumstances, I avail myself gratefully of your permission.'
- 'Where is Mr. Coote?' asked Dorothy, feeling silence awkward and dangerous.
- 'Johnnie? oh, I really don't know. I believe he is engaged in some mysterious sport rook-shooting, I think. We are capital friends, but we never share one another's pursuits.'
 - 'Is that a test of friendship?'
- 'Certainly. It keeps up the freshness of the relationship; for it is the constant contact of two natures which induces friction.
- 'Are you then of a quarrelsome nature?' demanded Dorothy.

- 'Yes, occasionally; not often though, for I am too indolent. Indolence is a great help towards possessing no vices. If one has no brilliant virtues, one suffers at least from no considerable defects.'
- 'Surely you are not without character? that is the description of a colourless person.'
- 'Why should one have character? I, for instance—who have everything I can wish for, and nothing particular to do. I have capacity for enjoyment, and I indulge it in a quiet fashion, feeling that after all there is nothing really worth having, no aspiration that does not crumble into dust as soon as anticipation has passed into reality. Have you ever felt like that? A kind of wearied acquiescence in life, and a considerable indifference to its cessation.'
- 'Never till to-day,' she replied, bending her head lower.
 - 'And to-day you felt——?'
- 'An indifference and a weariness such as you describe.'
 - 'And the cause?'
- 'I don't know—no,' and she checked herself, 'that is not true; but I can't tell it.'
 - 'Shall I guess—may I guess?'

Dorothy's feelings resembled those of the child dancing on the edge of a steep incline, and trying to see how near he can approach without falling. A delicious sense of giddiness urges him on nearer and ever nearer, and the sense of danger itself is almost a recommendation in favour of the exercise.

Keith, seeing he had received tacit permission to continue, said:

- 'You had built up for yourself a kind of dreamland, and to-day some one has rudely shattered it. In vulgar language, thrown cold water on your hopes. Is that it?'
- 'How do you know—are you a wizard?' asked Dorothy, with undisguised surprise.
- 'It is not necessary to be a wizard to know this—experience of the world is sufficient. I have met other girls.'
- 'To be sure.' And again the spasm of pain returned to Dorothy as she thought of the fortunate woman who had made her death his gain. There are ardent natures who think that to suffer with the beloved is a greater height of felicity than to enjoy with him. Dorothy was one of these; the key-note of her love, when she loved, would most certainly be self-surrender.

Keith smiled a little consciously. He was so sure of himself, so decided in his mind as to his own line of action, that he could afford to regard the pretty fluttering of a maidenly heart with no inconsiderable interest.

'To be sure—of course you have met other girls,' she repeated slowly, as though one should say, 'You have solved the problems of science; cube-roots are nothing to you.'

'When I say I have met other girls, I make no comparisons,' Keith murmured softly, as he fixed his expressive eyes, with their swift sidelong gaze, upon her face. 'I never met a girl like you.'

- 'Not even in Italy?'
- 'Not even in Italy. Italians are dark-complexioned.'
- 'But not all of them. Beatrice Cenci was fair.'
- 'The type, however, is dark; and their nature is jealous, suspicious, and self-concentrated. Your English temperament is a far pleasanter one.'
 - 'Because it gives you less trouble?'
- 'Because it is more really loving. I do believe in English girls.'
- 'English girls ought to be much obliged to you,' Dorothy said, plucking up a spirit.
- 'Well, I am not easily roused into enthusiasm—ask Coote. He says I am cynical.'
 - 'I suppose clever people generally are

cynical; they know so much, and can judge so severely.'

- 'I am not always cynical—not, for instance, when I walk in green lanes with an English girl.'
- 'I am glad you have your good moments,' Dorothy laughed pleasantly. She had recovered her equanimity, and with it her faith increased in fervour. It was absurd to think that such a man could ever be dishonourable or wicked. Cynicism in itself denoted a kind of rugged earnestness, whether manifested in neglect of creature-comforts, or in contempt of others' weaknesses.
- 'I have my good moments and my bad moments. I believe in angels, Miss Strait, spirits of good and evil that surround us with their influences and incline us in one direction or the contrary. You are my good angel, I am sure. When I am with you I feel at peace, soothed, almost as if I were really good, which of course I am not. It is a condition men of the world don't aspire to.'
- 'And at other times?' Dorothy's lips quivered. Was he really going to make a confession? had she indeed hitherto been credulous and foolish?
 - 'At other times—I am reckless, careless,

what you would call bad. Now tell me, what remedy can you prescribe?'

'The remedy is in your own hands,' she answered gravely, not quite confident of her own powers of preaching, and half afraid lest he should pretend to peccadilloes in order that she might promise absolution.

'You must drive out the bad angel.'

'I cannot. I am not even sure that my wishes point in that direction.'

It is not a new bait, that of painting one's self in the blackest of colours, in order to raise pity and interest in a pure breast, but it served Keith's purpose well. The girl was so innocent, she was like the wild bird who has never seen a lure.

- 'But you must wish.'
- 'I can only do that in the presence of my good angel. Do you reject the post I offer you? Will you be my influence, the influence that may make or mar my life?'
- 'I mar your life! you are dreaming now, Mr. Chester.'
- 'I was never less near to dreaming in my life. I am perfectly sober and serious, for I have gradually acquired the conviction that in you resides a power for good which is capable of transforming me. Women like

power. You do, I know. Then why not see what you can make of your power?

Dorothy's heart almost stopped beating, when she heard the slow dropping of his deliberate words following each other softly in a kind of chastened fervour, the fervour of a man who, while feeling deeply, dreaded to alarm her with any violent display of emotion. She was grateful to him for this. In the novels she had read people sobbed, and cried, and talked of misery and despair and rapture; and for such things, and anything approaching uncontrollable passion, Dorothy felt the most profound distaste. And the vista of a benign influence to be exerted over so intellectually promising a subject filled her soul with a tremor of delight.

'In what way do you mean this?' Dorothy said presently, longing for some more definite explanation, longing to hear Keith expound his views and talk about himself, while she enjoyed the sense of being somewhat of a divine monitor, to whom actions and sentiments must in the final result be referred.

'Have you ever thought of a life merged in that of another, of the concentrated energy radiating from two persons, one in aim and desires? I have longed for it myself, but I have never been able to realize it. I fancy I have realized it now.'

- 'Do you think such ideal happiness possible?' she asked timidly, joining her two hands together as if in prayer.
- 'I believe everything is possible to those who will firmly.'
- 'Ah! if one could believe that! How it would simplify matters.'
 - 'Believe it, then.'
- 'On your assurance? That would be abdicating my right to private judgment.'
- 'Then don't believe, but make the essay. Dorothy, be my good angel, as you are already the object of my deep devotion.'

Dorothy listened, and the sweetest of happy feelings thrilled her heart. She saw herself a kind of Beatrice to a new Dante, the inspiration and quickening spirit of a man's life. She was troubled by no mundane thoughts of marriage, a desirable position, and money-bags. Her soul soared far above such things to a kind of Elysian height where spiritual communion alone obtained. To the earth, however, she was soon brought back again by Keith's next question.

'Are you hesitating because of our slight acquaintance? Are you afraid to trust your-

self to me as my wife? I think you like me a little.'

Then it was a proposal of marriage after all, just such an event as happened to hundreds of commonplace girls! The influence he spoke of only meant perhaps presiding at a dinner-table, and skilfully organizing the due arrangement of guests' bedrooms. A little more or a little less money was not the question; she must inevitably lead a negative existence, suited to the capacity of ordinary women. A complete revulsion of feeling passed over her, and in a firm voice she answered:

- 'I have no wish to marry, at present.'
- 'But some day—you do not take away all hope, surely? Tell me, am I distasteful to you?'

Dorothy looked quickly up at her companion. The sentiment she entertained for him was certainly not that of distaste; indeed, she almost feared lest imagination and the sense of beauty had taken her reason captive. She knew that she was unable to calmly argue so long as pleading looks were darted at her from between drooping lashes; so long as the sweet voice rich in inflections rocked her senses into a delicious kind of torpor. All

thought seemed to be magnetized out of her, but yet with a strong effort to right herself she sought to keep the control of her own heart.

- 'May I hope?' Keith pleaded.
- 'Give me a little time; I cannot answer at once,' she murmured, all the while conscious that the tiniest concession meant final defeat.
 - 'How long?'
 - 'Three days.'
- 'No, I cannot wait so long. Dorothy, my dear Dorothy, be merciful!'
- 'To-morrow then,' she said, quickening her steps as though to crush further hesitation.
- 'So be it, then—to-morrow will seal my fate. I am glad you were merciful, for the day after to-morrow I shall not be alone, and company at such a time would have been intolerable.'
- 'Whom do you expect?' inquired Dorothy, relieved as the conversation lost some of the intensity of its tone.
- 'A friend of mine—Raphael Palis—whom I knew in Italy.'
 - 'What kind of man is he?'
- 'He reminds me of an amusing book,' Keith said with a smile. 'You will certainly like him, but I shall not be jealous. He is such a good fellow.'

- 'I suppose he is original?'
- 'Very much so; a mixture of the sublime and the ridiculous; the kind of creature that adores sweets and bonbons while he wields the most bitter of pens, never was known to be really in love, but talks a great deal about it, and writes sonnets and verses which he sets to music.'
- 'I like original people,' cried Dorothy, brightening. 'I am so glad he is coming.'
 - ' You are original, Miss Strait.'
- 'Oh no; only a pure provincial girl; something like the women in Madame Reybaud's stories.'
- 'Yes, something like Misé Brun—she was charming.'
- 'I did not mean to imply I was charming,' said Dorothy, reddening slightly. 'I only meant that I am, as it were, unworldly, because I have seen so little.'
 - 'You are charming,' he said tenderly.
- 'Don't pay me compliments, please. I long to see more of the world; then I shall not feel so insignificant.'
- 'You shall see the world—when we are married.'

Dorothy flushed again, but this time with a warm sense of undeserved happiness. They

had now reached the entrance to the village, and Keith deemed it advisable to take his leave. As he did so, he pressed Dorothy's hand, causing her another lively thrill, and said, dwelling on the words:

'To-morrow, at five o'clock, I shall come to be made happy or unhappy for the rest of my days. Try and think pleasantly of me; try your best, dear.'

Dorothy did not answer directly; she only said 'Good-bye.' But there was that in her face which made Keith's bosom glow, and caused a smile of satisfaction to curve his somewhat firmly compressed lips.





CHAPTER XI.

RAPHAEL PALIS APPEARS ON THE SCENE.

HE friend of whom Keith had spoken,
Raphael Palis, according to his usual
habit, disappointed all prevision, and
appeared suddenly on the following

day, having walked over from the station with his carpet-bag in his hand. The day was mild and the road dusty, and Palis's appearance (he was stout and short, of a rubicund blond complexion, and never at the best of times remarkable for neatness) presented to Keith's fastidious eyes an aspect both dishevelled and weary.

'Raphael!' he exclaimed, when his friend entered the cosy little blue-room, wearing a shabby black alpaca coat, boots white with dust, and carefully carrying a carpet-bag tied up with string. 'I did not expect you till to-morrow,

and I had intended to send the carriage for you and thus save you an unpleasant walk. I believe there is a dogcart here and an old horse—but my stables are not by any means in apple-pie order.'

'Well, you see, Keith,' said Palis, sinking wearily into a chair, but pertinaciously keeping his bag beside him, 'I happened to be in London, with nothing to do—diabolical weather—they call that spring, do they? it is much more like an atmosphere of ground-glass. I had been hustled and hunted from pillar to post, like a mad dog in Italy; I was thoroughly weary, so I just started off, with my loins girded and my staff in my hand—a reviewer's staff, you understand—the pen—and here I am.'

'Well, I'm very glad to see you. Have you brought any new verses; and what precious article is in that well-remembered bag?'

Palis glanced with a sly smile at the fat sides of his precious companion, and said, 'Jam!'

- 'Jam? why, Raphael, you are worse than ever.'
- 'Ah! mon cher,' answered the other, shrugging his shoulders, 'que voulez-vous? I get older, but I don't lose my love of sweets. Do

you like "marrons glaces"? I have some with me.'

'No,' said Keith, with a laugh. 'I don't care for sweets. I wonder why you are so partial to them.'

'Why,' remarked Palis, throwing himself in his chair and smacking his lips, 'sweets are the food of the gods. When I feel very low-spirited, life not worth having—you know, Keith, those trials come to us all—then I go to a confectioner and I buy myself a box of bonbons. I generally eat them straight through, it is always best not to economize one's enjoyment; and when the box is empty I feel better, and more reconciled to fate. It is a wonderful plan; I wonder you have never employed it.'

'Because I am not half a woman, like you, Raphael. I find ease and enjoyment in something less surfeity than sugar.'

'True, Keith, I always feel like an old aunt. I suppose it is my nature; I was brought up by women. But, do you know, you are wonderfully well *installé* here—you look quite the little gentleman.'

'Yes,' answered Keith, in an indolently pleased tone; with all his indifference to the position of an English landowner, he did not dislike to receive the half-envious congratulations of his friends.

Palis was not envious, nothing could be farther from his character; but he looked about him critically, observing objects with the admiring wonder of a child that longs, but dares not touch. 'And this is your own sanctum—it is very nice. I would have a piano here, however—a cottage, of course, there is no room for a grand.'

- 'Yes; but then, unfortunately, I don't play.'
- 'You used to play the violin?'
- 'So I do now sometimes, at least I scrape. One cannot live in Italy for many years without trying in some fashion one's hand at music, where the very air seems full of melody, and I think my scraping on the violin in romantic moods is productive of about the same result as your eating of bonbons. By the law of contraries it soothes.'
 - 'You are never romantic, Keith.'
- 'Not often, I confess. One can't deceive an old friend like you, before whom one has bared one's weaknesses.'
 - 'Ah yes, an old aunt,' softly added Palis.
- 'Yet, do you know, I have had an attack of romance lately—quite a bad one. I am still, in fact, in the middle of my crise.'

- 'Merciful Providence! you, Keith!'
- 'Yes, I. I think I am going to make a fool of myself.'
 - 'Marry?'

Keith nodded.

- 'Surely! you don't say so! And the lady?'
- 'Raphael, there we shall agree; she is simply perfect.
 - "" Meet queen for any kingly king, With gold dust on her hair."
- 'I know—an insipid blonde. They abound in England.'
- 'Not at all, Raphael. I am quite sure you will be of my opinion when you see her; any one of your artistic nature must be. She is a dream of pure *cinque-cento* conception.'
- 'Bah! do they exist? I prefer a good cook, who can make fondants à la crême and petits choux au chocolat. I had some in Paris last week,' he continued meditatively, slowly licking his lips, as if seeking to revive in his memory the sense of departed gastronomic enjoyments.
 - 'Raphael! listen to me. I am tired of amourettes. I want to settle. This girl is an angel.'
 - 'Haven't I always told you one must get tired of amourettes? friendship is the only thing worth having. By-the-bye, do you

know Aleck Duncan? He and I travelled home from Italy. I found him wonderfully sympathetic; we have sworn eternal friendship.'

- 'Which will last——?'
- 'Well, perhaps six months. After all, Keith, six months is a long time—it is half a year.'
- 'Under those circumstances I don't see much difference between amourettes and friendship; they are both equally unsatisfactory. I thought, at least, the superior excellence of friendship was exemplified in its duration.'
- 'My dear fellow, the great charm of existence is variety. The finest violinist cannot always play on the same string.'
- 'I suppose I shall have to do so when I am married. I expect my answer this afternoon, and I think—I have every reason to hope—it will be a favourable one.'
- 'Then, Keith, I can only say, "Vogue la galère." I suppose you will be very happy—for six months.'
 - 'Raphael, I beg of you not to sneer.'
- 'I? I never sneer. Is there anyone else staying here, or are we alone?'
 - 'Coote, Johnnie Coote is here. No one else.'
- 'Coote, the man who shoots? He won't care for me.'
 - 'You don't know him; he is the most good-

natured of mortals. Besides, he is much engrossed by the sister of the young lady in question.'

'But, my dear fellow, how many more young ladies must I hear about? This country seems to be a garden of Venus. Tell me everything. What a world it is!'

Palis complacently crossed his little fat legs, and settled himself in an attitude of attention.

'There are two sisters. You will see them this afternoon, if you will come with me when I call there at tea-time.'

'That will be very soon then, for it is now already four o'clock. Let me go upstairs and have a wash, Keith. I cannot present myself before strange ladies, thus!'

'Come along, then, and bring the bag.'

Palis was soon installed in a pleasant bedroom looking out over the entrance and across the gravel sweep, to the big cedar that stood in lonely majesty in the round grass-plot. He gazed for a moment at the prospect, then turning, began an inspection of the quaint pictures in their faded gold frames hanging on the walls. One was that of a lady in hunting dress, clad in the scanty drapery affected by the painters of that period; a large greyhound leapt up beside her, while a huge

bunch of painted roses occupied the corner of the picture. The lady was very décolletée, and had alluring eyes and a dimple in her chin. On the other side of the fireplace glared a grim-visaged man in armour, and above the bed hung a print of the Christian martyr. Palis laughed to himself, and presently a violent splashing of water, and the sound of a rich voice trolling out the song 'C'est Marie, soyez ma vie, soyez ma mie!' could be distinctly heard by anyone who at that moment had chanced to walk down the passage.

While Palis was thus agreeably employed, Dorothy trembled as the hour of tea approached. During the night she had lain awake in a state of rapturous torpor, thinking deeply. Was the happiness of her future life dependent upon her own free will and young unpractised judgment, or upon love and Destiny, which now presided immutably? If she decided to marry, how would it fare with her pursuit of knowledge, with the career of serious study, perhaps ending in fame, which she had imagined for herself? If, on the contrary, she declined, was she not putting away from her chances of happiness that might never again recur? Was it possible for her to meet another man like Keith? could she feel for anyone else as she did for him? could she indeed bear to let him go?——here her thoughts ended in a kind of tremulous sob. It was difficult to decide for herself in solitude, yet again it seemed impossible to confide so tender a secret to her mother and sister.

When morning broke, the only conviction Dorothy had come to was that she dared not bind herself yet, that she must beg for further time to be given her for deliberation, and trust, like a true gambler, to chance.

At the bottom of all her irresolution, however, she nourished a lurking kind of conviction that it was impossible to let Keith go; that the power of a stronger will was upon her, and that her destiny had unconsciously already shaped itself. Dorothy was no manœuvrer; she had formed no idea as to the mode in which Keith must be acquainted with her decision or indecision, as it must more fairly be called; and she knew that Mrs. Strait always sat in the room during his visits. A tête-à-tête seemed therefore impossible, and Dorothy recognised this fact without much regret. Everything happened, however, differently, as things generally do in real life: instead of Keith by himself, the maid-servant ushered in also his two friends. Margaret was present on this occasion in the black dress with its

brilliant flashes of scarlet: and the trio that met Palis's observant blue eyes was certainly no ordinary one. Mrs. Strait, subdued by the more frequent advent of visitors into a less fidgety and nervous condition, sat placidly by her everlasting work-basket; lilies of the valley in a vase behind her twinkled from a background of dim shadow, where Dorothy stood with gold-gleaming hair and quiet modest movements. The scene was attractive, and domestic enough to please the eyes of a spoilt bachelor accustomed to every luxury, and to the gratification of artistic tastes. Margaret and her admirer soon paired off, and retired happily into a corner, away from the steaming tea-table, to play cat's-cradle, leaving Palis to listen to Mrs. Strait's talk, and by his quaint remarks introduce greater confusion and incoherence into the good lady's observations. Keith and Dorothy spoke in an undertone —love is partial to whispers.

- 'What is my answer? he said, bending as if to notice the roses of the crewel-work she held on her lap. Dorothy looked at him pleadingly.
 - 'Do not ask me to give it yet, please.'
- 'The longer I wait the more favourable must be the answer then—is it so?'
 - 'I think we neither of us know the other—'

- 'What do you want to know? I know all I wish.'
- 'Our tastes differ,' she faltered, her eyes wandering round the room in search of some valid reason for a demurrer; but naturally, having once introduced a possibility of escape, finding none.
- 'Two people who are perfectly alike, never agree.'
 - 'Then again, I am still very young--'
- 'A fault that mends itself every day. I am not so young. That strikes the just balance, you see.'

Dorothy stopped arguing, and stuck her needle vaguely into her work as she cast about for an answer.

But Keith was not a man who had uselessly gained experience. Indecision, the apparent difficulty of his suit, fevered his blood and increased his determination.

The little golden head beside him tempted him like the apple of the Hesperides, the sweet chiselled features were beautiful to him as an illuminated missal, the tender curving lips quivering with emotion surely waited but the kiss of love to ripen into rosier bloom. Keith was a man of sluggish passions, yet of exquisite taste, and a seeker after subtle

sensations. Dorothy had procured him new sensations. Her very simplicity irritated his nerves with an intimation of unknown delights, like some powerful Eastern perfume that resembles no scent of plant or flower, and yet contains the essences of all scents, a perfume which you cannot recognise distinctively as rose, or heliotrope, or jessamine, but which sets you sweetly dreaming of the deep-hearted lotus flowers, of frankingense, or starry clusters of stephanotis. Was it, perhaps, the flower of perfect innocence that made Dorothy so attractive?

Keith resolved that this tender-hued flower should be his, and he resolved that she should love him also. The task he set himself was not difficult. Imagination plays the chief part in a girl's love, and Keith had already, by his beauty and his charm, appealed vividly to her imagination.

Palis watched the couple out of the corner of his pale blue eyes, while apparently engaged in conversation with Mrs. Strait. To him it seemed like the game of serpent-charming. He knew well on whose side the victory must lie, but he was deeply interested in the gentle, winsome maiden, who resembled Marguerite listening to her Faust.

'Don't answer,' Keith was saying—'don't speak if it is hard to you. There are some thoughts one cannot attempt to put into words. Let me take your hand—so—no one is looking. How cold your fingers are, dear! Don't draw it away. Let it lie there—and as it lies there of your own free will, like a little bird in its warm nest, let that be your answer.'

Dorothy's little hand trembled; she felt that she had really surrendered herself, that the gift meant an almost terrible reality, a taking for better, for worse, a loving through life unto eternity, a glimpse of heaven and a possibility of hell, an inspiration of life and a foretaste of death.





CHAPTER XII.

LOVERS.

HE bride! let's look at her!' Margaret cried, in the fresh ringing tones that struck on the vibrating air like the shrill clang of a bell,

while she held her sister at arm's-length, and ran her laughing eyes over her appearance.

Dorothy, with a blush and a smile, tried to extricate herself; but Margaret was the stronger of the two, and madly mischievously inclined.

'How dare you, Dorothy, with your five feet four and your ashen-coloured hair, steal a march on my raven locks and five feet six and three-quarter inches? I believe Mr. Chester is afraid of a tall woman. He thinks you will be more easily cowed, perhaps beaten, with your slight figure and your pale face, than I should. I am convinced he is a tyrant.'

'Margaret, don't!' reproved her sister, in a pained voice. 'He thinks you beautiful; he has told me so. Of course, you are far more beautiful than I am. Who ever doubted it? But he likes me—I really can't tell why; here a lovely expression of timid happiness passed over her face. 'It is so good of him—is it not?'

'You are a fool, Dorothy!' said Margaret sharply. 'He likes you because you are lovely, and some people prefer blondes. But I don't envy you. I mistrust that man.'

Margaret released her as she spoke, and Dorothy, still tingling with rosy red and shyness at the banter of her sharp-tongued sister, drew a low footstool towards her, and now sat, her head leaning against the lintel of the white chimney-piece and her two hands clasped in her lap.

'You look like Cinderella,' said Margaret, lolling back on the sofa, 'in that grey dress. Tell me, shall you always wear those Puritan colours and common stuffs when you are married?'

'You know, Margaret, I wear them now because they are cheap and we are poor.'

- · 'Fie, Dorothy! Scarlet and blue are as cheap. You have your own peculiar vanity.'
- 'As you please.' Dorothy shrugged her shoulders. 'When I am married, I shall wear what Keith likes.'
- 'Keith! Oh, you have learnt already to call him by his name. Let's see—you have been engaged twenty-four hours. You must indeed feel like an old married woman!'
- 'Margaret!' called Mrs. Strait querulously from her armchair, 'don't tease the child. Your turn may come next, possibly.'
- 'I am sure I hope it will, mamma; and when it does, you are welcome to tease me as much as you like. One can bear a little inconvenience when one has just landed twenty thousand a year. That is Mr. Chester's income, I believe.'
 - 'Margaret, you are horrid!' broke in Dorothy. 'I am sure I never thought about his money.'
 - 'Of course not, you little innocent! You would not have married him without it, though; you know that right well.'
- 'Don't cry, Dorothy,' warned Mrs. Strait, seeing the tears gathering in her eyes. 'Your sister is envious of your superior happiness.'

'Mamma, I declare you are too bad. I, never in the world!—jealous of poor dear old Dorothy! You don't believe it, do you, dear? I declare, if this marriage is to bring about quarrelling, even between sisters, I wish to goodness it may never take place.'

Dorothy's gentle heart was touched. She stretched out her hands to Margaret, and the two girls embraced one another with renewed affection.

Mrs. Strait had received the news of Dorothy's engagement in her usually vague and flurried manner.

'Asked you to marry him?—Very good of him, I am sure, my dear—you, the penniless daughter of a literary man. But I hope his principles are good—Church principles, of course—we know so little of him. But there, men attend church after they are married, and I suppose their souls are more easily saved than one's own soul, and that's why they don't care so much. They have far more to do—they couldn't spare the time. But goodness, what's to be done about the trousseau? I never could afford one suitable to Mrs. Chester.'

'Never mind the trousseau, mamma; I will be married in a bonnet,' whispered Dorothy, taking her mother's limp hand and pressing it against her own soft cheek. She yearned for a more motherly speech. What did the cut or fashion of clothes signify, when the happiness of a whole life was at stake? She would have liked Mrs. Strait to have laid her hands on her head maternally, and blessed her as Isaac blessed Jacob, or she would have preferred a few heartfelt words of approval:

'You have done well, my child; you will be happy!'

Never till this instant had Mrs. Strait's parental insufficiency displayed itself so clearly in the cold and naked light of truth, and it was an inward shock to Dorothy's loving nature to find the smallest flaw in one who, previous to this discovery, had not only given her life but comfort. Dorothy was careful not to betray the disparaging remarks made by Mrs. Maynard upon her betrothed, and Mrs. Strait having given a somewhat contradictory assent, the lovers met the following day by appointment in the little green drawing-room. The first interview after the acceptance of a marriage proposal between two people proves usually somewhat embarrassing. Theman is apt to shock feminine sensitiveness by a too prompt assumption of possessiveness, by a sudden dropping of the veil of diffidence, and by an undisguised assurance of triumph; the element of capture having been nowise eliminated from modern ideas of marriage, though now treated in a more refined and elegant fashion.

The girl in her turn is pleased to bear an aspect of pride and cold reserve, coquetting in true female fashion with a show of coy indif-Dorothy did not assume this, for she really felt the most overpowering shyness. What did she know of this man, her master. advancing, hat in hand, with smiling assurance to greet her? She had promised herself to him certainly, but what did she know of him, save that in his presence she felt rest and a sense of exquisite well-being? She stood there thinking, in her straight-falling gown, with a composed tender timidity, clasping her slight fingers resolutely on the back of the black ebony chair on which they rested as she waited. Keith thought she had never looked so lovely.

'Alone! Dorothy, this is indeed unexpected happiness! Alone with my bride!' And he pressed forward eagerly to clasp her in his arms. But Dorothy waved her hand; something in his eyes frightened her, and she pointed with her finger to a seat not far from where she stood.

'Sit down there too, dear,' he said, the tinge of passion obliterated, as he obeyed. 'Sit down and talk to me.'

Who does not know that lovers' talk-so sweet, so silly, and so never-to-be-forgotten, full of the delicious novelty of a sensation never before experienced—the sensation Plato defines as friendship, 'Two souls in one body'? Keith was an admirable lover. He possessed all the deftness and sensitiveness necessary for the art of charming; he knew how to say sweet things so that they never surfeited, and trite things as if they sprang fresh from his brain; he could win confidence and inspire love; he could induce respect and command admiration. His education had been that of a finished scholar and diplomatist. He could read women's weaknesses like a book, and he could, though in a lesser degree, appreciate their qualities. The result of the first lovers' meeting, was to impress Keith with the thorough conviction that Dorothy's heart lay innocently before him, its fair white pages folded open like the petals of a full-blown rose, glowing with an ardent and unselfish love for him, a love that would defy all obstacles and smile at all difficulties, and which would remain steadily pure and uncalculating. For the first time perhaps in

his life, he knew that a guileless girl-nature was his, to mould, develop or ruin, as he pleased. There did not seem much chance of ruin at the present time, however, while they sat hand in hand, the man's dark head bent protectingly over the lily-white girl-face, transfigured with love, but steadfastly, as with some recondite idea of procrastinated and more precious bliss, refusing him all caresses but the gentle pressure of her hand.

After half an hour spent thus, Keith rose to go, with a strange new sense of quiet happiness filling his breast, a sensation differing considerably from the turbulent and passionate emotion which heretofore had formed the experience of his love. Perhaps, he thought, there might exist something sacred in marriage which purified a man's feelings, and, as it were, in narrowing and bounding, also ennobled them.

When he left the Angel House the night had arrived; a myriad stars quivered and glittered in the dark blue canopy overhead; the moon threw slanting gashes of light across the road, and invested each hedge and bush with a look of unaccustomed gloom. Moonlight carries with it a special sense of eternity, of the still brooding spirit moving in solitude and silence over the face of the waters, and filling men's

minds with awe. Pascal knew it, when he said, 'Le silence éternal de ces espaces infinis m'effraie.' The light has an unearthly vividness, the shadows lie in more portentously black and tangible masses, the world and its petty worries lapse into distance, the soul expands in freedom, the mind rises to ethereal heights; it is a moment of entrancing self-abandonment for hearts that love, a moment of spiritual illumination for the absorbed devotee, an hour of self-introspection even to the man of the world.

Keith, as he paced along smoking a cigarette, moving quickly, now across a patch of road illuminated brightly by the moonbeams, now almost disappearing in a mysterious depth of sombre shadow, reviewed his past life with a sigh, registering a mental vow that he would turn over a new leaf and try to be worthy of the trusting woman who had given herself into his keeping. The lightest of men have their pious moments, their earnest resolutions, their well-meaning aspirations; but the intentions are short-lived, evaporating with the moonlight that gave them birth, a very midsummer night's dream. Dorothy, so ran his reflections, was very beautiful; she would make a lovely châtelaine. They would keep open house for the admiration of the county, he would take her to London, give balls, stand for Parliament, perhaps be made a peer.

Who could tell what rung of the ladder of success he could not mount? A clever man, a beautiful wife, a large fortune, were advantages not lightly to be despised. Keith carried his head higher. He should know how to make the best possible use of these advantages. Hitherto all had been success in his life; all must continue to be success for the future—legitimate, honourable success.

When a man was rich, he felt no temptation to be dishonest. Generous, charitable, even, he would be, beloved possibly. Poor dependents, he knew, were gained by small kindnesses; his tenants should be kindly treated. He was glad that already Jackson had been forgiven Example was everything. his rent. Chester's generosity could not fail to be discussed and praised. Intellectual enjoyment, too—Dorothy should have her books, the society of clever people, musicians, and artists. Fame and genius might worship at his shrine. He would surround himself with the rarest objects of beauty, for he adored beauty; he adored exquisite forms, statuary, pictures, and luxurious furniture. Then, again, there would be the satisfaction of knowing that he was leading a good life, and was entitled to the respect and admiration of his equals and his inferiors.

Keith had lived a bad life: he did not seek to palliate his faults. He knew they were faults, but circumstances had forced them on him; in some cases it was impossible always to act according to the highest principle. Success was the test of merit. He did not speak of these things to Dorothy; there was no need to sully her pure mind and sadden her glad heart with stories of a man's weaknesses or follies. All men did wrong before marriage, and not every man did right afterwards. He, however, intended to incur no further blot or stain on his reputation, and Dorothy, his good angel, must lead him by the hand in the paths of propriety and virtue. That was woman's mission, and a truly noble Men sinned lightly and indulged mission. their vices for a few years, repenting in the arms of a loving wife. Repentance—no; that was for monks and fanatic priests. Men of the world became serious—yes, that was the word, serious—and took to politics or philanthropy, and the women prayed for their success. Women always prayed, he believed. He had

no doubt that this very evening Dorothy would fall on her knees by her snowy bed, and offer up fervent petitions for him, commending him to the care of Heaven. It was a pretty idea a sentimental idea, one quite in unison with the purity of a girl's thoughts and the flutter of ministering angels' wings. It pleased Keith's intuitively artistic perceptions, fed on the pictured Madonnas of Italy. He himself did not believe in the efficacy or necessity of prayer, though of course, when he was married, he should attend the parish church and periodically ask the parson to dine. People who had a good position, and respected themselves, always paid proper attention to the ministers of religion; but devout sentiments were pretty and eminently correct—in a woman.

He would not have liked Dorothy to be irreligious or a scoffer; he preferred her just as she was—simple, trusting, and pious. Then it occurred to him that they had never discussed theology, and that really, on the whole, he scarcely knew what religious views she held. That was but a trifle, however. She had once said that God could change a man's soul, and the Vicar had mentioned her attendance at early services.

Certainly Keith had done well for himself.

The moonlight, usually suggestive of melancholy reflections, stimulated and cheered him instead. When night brought no troublesome spectres and conscience bore no present reproaches, a man could well be content. Keith tossed away the end of his cigarette and turned blithely in at his lodge-gate. He had seldom hoped that the prospect of matrimony could be so eminently reassuring and calculated to promote sound sleep.





CHAPTER XIII.

A DRONINGTON COMMITTEE.

HE parish of Dronington was a progressive parish. Ever since Mr.

Maynard had entered the Vicarage, three years ago, he had organized

and encouraged every species of plan for the mental and bodily welfare of his flock. Fresh from a fashionable seaside resort where Ritualism had, after a bitter period of opposition and controversy, finally attained exuberant proportions, he sought to imbue the country parishioners now under his care with the peculiar tenets he held. At first novelty alone proved a potent factor, and after an anxious time of unslackened effort he gained over a considerable majority to his opinions. On his arrival at Dronington he had discovered that

12

only a few old women attended the Church services, and that, partly from indifference, partly from dislike, the remainder of the congregation frequented the adjacent Dissenting Chapel, or, on the other hand, dispensed with any religious services at all. The dull old Vicar had droned sleepily to the high-backed pews and the fidgety knot of school-children Sunday after Sunday, awakening the echoes but certainly not the souls of the worshippers, until the well-to-do who could afford to drive some distance had quietly forsaken the parish church and attended a fashionable temple in the town of Slowchester.

The report of Mr. Maynard's decidedly High Church views had preceded him, and at the announcement of his appointment after the old Vicar's death, most of the people declared that nothing should induce them to go and hear a whole set of new-fangled doctrines which had never been considered necessary for the salvation of their fathers' souls. The first sermon that Mr. Maynard preached was naturally the crucial test. Vases of flowers and a pair of candlesticks stood on the altar, contrary to all precedent; and on the wall, over the hideous box-like affair that sheltered the preacher and served as a pulpit, was fixed the

text, 'I am the true Vine.' The schoolchildren amused themselves by spelling out the quaint Gothic letters of the text or by counting the flowers in the vases during the sermon, conducting themselves consequently with unusual propriety, and the small congregation listened attentively as the new clergyman read himself in. The sermon was short, true, and earnest. Mr. Maynard's clear ringing tones, full of manly energy and deep conviction, contrasted favourably with the late Vicar's nasal sing-song, the defective vision which caused him perpetually to stop and repeat himself till he succeeded in deciphering the words before him, or the painful trembling of his thin hands while he turned the leaves of his manuscript. Mr. Maynard preached without a book, he used considerable action in the pulpit, and he looked right before him with a resolute piercing eye that seemed to search and drag to light the secret of all hearts.

'I declare if I didn't think the Vicar must have heard about our quarrel last night,' said one old woman to her husband. 'He gave it to us so strong about living in unity. It's well enough for the clergy to talk, but they can't know how aggravating it is when a man stumbles in dead-drunk o'night, having spent the Saturday's wages, wi' nothing to show for 'em.'

'Or how bad it is for a man when the dinner ain't ready and he comes home hungry, as tired as a dog,' retorted the husband.

On this occasion at least the sermon bore no fruits, for the worthy Mrs. Secker and her husband continued to heap recriminations on one another until they reached the door of their cottage, when the old lady started off in search of the pie that had been left at the baker's to be cooked.

Mr. Maynard, however, said a few words at the conclusion of his sermon which created considerable hubbub among the rural population.

'My friends,' he observed, in a quiet tone, 'you have been told that my views differ in many respects from those held by your late Vicar. You had the benefit of his ministrations for many years, and you do not seem to have availed yourselves of them very largely, for I hear that the church has never been filled. Yet if all the parishioners attended, the church would be too small for their needs. Well, you gave the late Vicar a fair trial; now I wish you to give me a fair trial. I want

you all to come to church and hear what I have to say; and if after a few months you don't like my ways, and don't approve of my doctrines, then I will revert to the fashions that have prevailed hitherto. I think that is fair speaking from man to man. Let me see that you agree by coming in large numbers to the evening service to-night.'

This exhortation pleased the people by its straightforwardness and simplicity. They came, and, what is more, they listened to the new Vicar. The early celebrations at five in the morning, on Christmas and other great feasts, were attended; the services developed an ornate ceremonial without one murmur from any grumblers; the music ceased to be discordant and horrible; a surpliced choir sat in their proper place, and sang instead of the wheezy children in the gallery; and while drunkenness diminished, civility increased among the villagers.

'He's a good man, he is,' public opinion averred, and goodness, to those simple folks, seemed to cover a multitude of sins in the shape of candles, crucifixes, and vestments, until by degrees Dronington earned the reputation of a model parish. It was still rough in a degree. Men and boys still lounged and

swore and loitered about the cross-roads, though they had ceased to perpetrate practical jokes and horse-play, and to indulge their powers of mischief in tripping up old ladies in the dark as they returned sedately, prayer-book in hand, from evening church.

One of the most valuable organizations in the village—at least, in Mrs. Parkinson's opinion-was the Benevolent Society for the Prevention of Poverty, which met once a month in committee, and of which Mr. Maynard was the chairman. The Vicar did not exactly approve of the working of the society, and he was decidedly averse to committees, much preferring to manage matters himself in true autocratic fashion, without appeal to numberless other interests. He advocated the supreme sway of the Church, and, in a lesser degree, he would have liked the clergy to rule despotically; but his calm good sense taught him that before you can rule men, you must influence them strongly, and for that purpose you must interest yourself in their pursuits and project your mind into their grooves of thought.

The Vicar did not always attend the committee-meetings, and on those occasions Mr. Horsfall, the Slowchester distiller, presided.

It would then sometimes happen that, after a course of tedious arguing among the committee, Mr. Maynard suddenly walked in, and with clear and trenchant logic snapped the thread of discussion in twain, and in the course of a few moments satisfactorily settled the point in dispute. Of course, Mrs. Parkinson was a great personage at these committee-meetings. Dorothy also attended them, but rarely took any part beyond giving a silent attention and holding up her hand when a vote was requested.

Some days after her interview with her betrothed, described in the last chapter, occurred one of these monthly meetings. Mrs. Parkinson always fetched Dorothy, and walked home with her subsequently, cheering the short walk by enthusiastic accounts of the work done, or of the wonderful results which she anticipated from her charitable The Benevolent Society was a kind schemes. of co-operative almsgiving on a large scale. It was a mixture of blanket club, maternity charity, nursing society, and servants' registry office. It professed to do everything for everybody, to sympathize with and to assist every kind of distress. It was indeed a magnificent conception, or, as Mrs. Parkinson expressed it,

- 'a heavenly cord of brotherhood binding the rich to the poor.' Mrs. Parkinson had probably never heard of St. Simon's writings, but her schemes were a mixture of lady-like communistic sentiment, carried into practical execution by the authority of a dignified parental authority. The poor, she thought, were certainly abominably ill-treated, and much to be pitied, though they afforded an agreeable occupation and a never-ending source of interest to the rich, for whose own advantage they seemed somehow to be bountifully destined by Providence.
- 'At this moment, my dear,' Mrs. Parkinson dilated to the listening Dorothy as they walked along, 'I have such a case—something terribly sad; a young man—so good-looking, so interesting——'
- 'An Ethiopian?' asked Dorothy, with a faint touch of sarcasm; 'nobody will be interested in a negro.'
- 'No, an American, a Southerner from those aristocratic and beautiful climes. You may say what you will, and of course it was very bad of them to keep slaves and all that; still, they were brought up in the notion it was right, and there's no knowing what you or I might have done in the same case; but it is

certain they are the true gentlemen of America. I will tell you all about the case presently, for here we are.'

The meeting was held in the people's reading-room, one of the numerous institutions inaugurated during the Vicar's pastoral government. A large table, at which Mr. Goldie, the curate, stood busily engaged writing papers, occupied one corner of the bare whitewashed apartment. Only Miss Patten, the old maid of the parish (what would parishes do without their old maid-energetic, benevolent, and tolerably well off?), who was taking off her galoches and hanging out her waterproof over a chair-back (it did not rain, but Miss Patten never neglected these precautions), and Mr. and Mrs. Horsfall had as yet arrived. Dorothy, having shaken hands with them, withdrew quietly to a chair in the corner; but Mrs. Parkinson bustled anxiously from one to the other, favouring each with a mysterious whisper.

'Mr. Maynard is not going to take the chair,' said Mrs. Horsfall ponderously. She was very fat, had small eyes, heavy hanging cheeks, and a large gold watch-chain laid carefully across her ample bosom. 'What a pity, for we have the annual report to-day!'

'It is a very good report,' said Mr. Horsfall briskly, his good-humoured face and short square nose enshrined comfortably between close-cut grey whiskers.

'Good report! well, I don't know what you call a good report,' Miss Patten remarked snappishly. 'If my opinion had been taken, and that silly grant to Mrs. Gilling who keeps the club, for the provisions supplied to the men, been refused, we should have had a far larger balance.'

Miss Patten's remarks fell flat, for the remainder of the committee now entered, and Mr. Horsfall took his place at the head of the table as chairman.

'We are here,' he said somewhat hesitatingly, looking at the papers he held in his hands as though he were not quite sure in what language they were written, 'to consider the annual report of the Benevolent Society, a society which affords help to the destitute who are not destitute by their own fault, and encouragement to the well-doer, as in the case of the maternity charity'—('The people have far too many children already,' mildly muttered to himself the sandy-haired and freckled-faced curate)—'or of instruction and amusement to toilers in the enjoyment of

the club, in the convenient precincts of which it is permitted us to sit to-day.'

'Had you not better go on with the report?' audibly remarked Miss Patten. 'We ought to spend only an hour at the committee, and at this rate we shall spend four.'

'Ladies and gentlemen'—Mr. Horsfall, checked in his well-balanced discourse, resumed the purely practical part of the subject—'we have but a small balance in hand, viz., £20; not a large sum certainly, but which, by the blessing of Providence, I hope will soon increase largely. I now proceed to read the item's of expenditure, subscriptions and donations.'

This ceremony being concluded, and the budget unanimously approved of—

'I wish to make a suggestion,' said Mrs. Parkinson.

'Certainly.'

The chairman bowed politely:

'You remember Burns's lines:

"Her 'prentice hand she tried on man, And then she made the lasses, O!"

We are always glad of ladies' suggestions.'

'I should think so indeed,' remarked Miss Patten. 'Why, the committee is nearly all composed of ladies.'

- 'My suggestion is that we should really, now that the society has existed for the space of two years at least, form ourselves into an order, say, of deaconesses.'
- 'Oh, Mrs. Parkinson!' reproachfully exclaimed the fat distiller's wife, 'we are not members of the Evangelical persuasion.'
- 'In that case we should have to wear a dress. And how about the gentlemen?' plaintively urged Mrs. Flint, whose husband was Keith's agent, but would have nothing to do with the society. 'It only encourages a lot of useless beggars,' was his sharp and not entirely undeserved verdict.
- 'No, no; don't let us become sectarian,' said the chairman. 'The great beauty of the society lies in its catholicism—that it is broad.'
- 'Mr. Goldie has taken a great deal of trouble in preparing a report of the various deaconess institutions——'
- 'Hang the report!' said Mr. Horsfall coarsely. He was a self-made man, and occasionally reverted to his originally rough speech. 'I beg your pardon, madam. I mean, don't you think it a pity to introduce a new element into the untroubled waters on which the society has hitherto floated securely?'
 - 'My own idea is,' began Miss Patten, clear-

ing her throat as if preparing to address a jury—'my own idea is that we should thank Mr. Goldie for his trouble.'

- 'Oh yes, by all means, thank him for his trouble,' came from a chorus of voices.
- 'And bearing in mind that the good we do is illimitable, and cannot be bounded by the rules of a sect, or narrowed by the peculiar dress or customs of any other society, simply ignore the motion.'
- 'But there is as yet no motion,' said the chairman sweetly.
 - 'I thought Mrs. Parkinson——'
- 'Mrs. Parkinson has moved nothing; she only made a suggestion.'
- 'She only made a suggestion,' again came borne on the air in a rippling echo from the voices of the other ladies.
- 'Then, of course, you must embody a motion in the words that I have ventured to adopt.'
- 'Indeed, Miss Patten, there is nothing to be embodied in a motion. The matter must just drop.'

Miss Patten tapped her foot on the stone floor impatiently. She had not much belief in any business that she did not herself control and suggest.

'I see on the minute,' continued Mr. Hors-

fall, when silence had been restored, 'that it is proposed for a sub-committee to be formed to consider specially the case of Widow Daly, who has appealed to the society.'

'It is a very sad case,' said Mrs. Parkinson. None of the other ladies spoke.

'Who is to be on the sub-committee—will you, Miss Strait?' asked the chairman, turning kindly to Dorothy, whose pretty face and soft voice caused him to look favourably upon her.

'Oh no; not me, please!' she said ungrammatically, in her confusion.

'You know why?' whispered Mrs. Maynard to her neighbour, Mrs. Horsfall. 'She is being courted by Mr. Chester. I believe they are engaged. Indeed, I almost wonder she is here to-day.'

'He is very rich, is he not?'

Mrs. Horsfall opened her small eyes as wide as she could, and put up her eye-glass to have a look at Dorothy.

'Very rich; but it won't be a success, that marriage.' Mrs. Maynard shook her head dolefully.

'Why not? Do tell me. Is it a secret?'

'Now, ladies, I really must beg for your attention,' said Mr. Horsfall, rapping on the

- table. 'The question before the committee is one of great importance. Who is to form the sub-committee? Mrs. Parkinson, of course. You, Miss Patten?'
- 'No, really.' Miss Patten put up her hands deprecatingly. 'Indeed, I had much rather not. I disapprove of the project, and I really know nothing whatever about it.'
- 'All the more reason for you to be on the sub-committee, and then your adverse opinion will carry weight.'
 - 'Well, if you put it in that way---'
- 'I should like to know,' asked Mrs. Flint apologetically, who always spoke with a nervous twitter, but nevertheless contrived to put skilfully embarrassing questions, 'I should like to know who drew up the appeal that was published in the Slowchester Beacon, and why we ladies of the committee did not see it?'
- 'Mr. Goldie drew it up. I, for one, saw it,' answered Miss Patten, with dignity.
- 'Oh, indeed; then I beg pardon for the interruption. Of course, it was very well worded; only I did think, as a member——'

The rest of Mrs. Flint's speech was lost in the depths of her muff, over which she now bent her head.

'The Vicar!'

A rustle of expectation ran round the room; the ladies straightened the folds of their dresses and looked up expectantly. Mr. Horsfall made a movement as though to cede his place.

'No, no!' the Vicar said, approaching the table. 'I only came for one moment to ask what you have decided about Widow Daly's case.'

'That is precisely the question before us now,' murmured Mr. Horsfall, with his habitual hesitation, which gave him the air of a respectable old hen considering on her perch. 'We wish to form a sub-committee, and the ladies are not quite agreed.'

'Please decide for us, Mr. Maynard!' several feminine voices cried in unison, with an intense sense of relieved responsibility in their tones.

The Vicar glanced round, looking tall and manly as he stood by the table, resting one hand upon it, while an amused twinkle lurked in his eyes.

'Miss Patten, Mrs. Parkinson, Mrs. Horsfall, Mrs. Goldie, Mrs. Flint—will that do?' he asked, running over the names glibly. The ladies bowed. Somehow Mr. Maynard's pre-

sence rendered objections impossible. He had the faculty of inducing conviction as well as obedience, which stamped him at once as a leader of men. The committee soon after broke up, and the ladies streamed out in knots of twos and threes, the most favoured remaining behind for a short consultation with the Vicar. On this occasion Miss Patter was the favoured lady, and received with stolid pride the glances of envy that were darted at her.

'I am glad that is settled,' quietly observed Mrs. Parkinson to Dorothy, as they turned out of the square plot of ground in which stood the people's reading-room, into the long straggling street of red-brick houses. 'Poor Widow Daly, I hope I shall have my own way with the sub-committee—ah, there comes my case, my young American, and I have never told you his story. Never mind, I must introduce you. Now remember, you are to feel interested.'

'I will try to be so,' smiled back Dorothy, looking with a certain curiosity at the young man now advancing towards them. He wore a small moustache, but was otherwise carefully shaven. The yellow hue of his complexion, the expression of his eyes—small, bright and furtive —the closely cropped condition of his black hair, the sleekness and smoothness of hair and face, gave him the air of a recently discharged prisoner; though his clothes were neat and gentlemanly, and, as Dorothy's careful eye noticed, his hands white and well shaped. He bowed low as the ladies approached, tossing off his hat with a neat turn of his elbow, savouring of the stilted politeness of an actor of the past generation. Mrs. Parkinson immediately whispered to her companion:

'What manners! Did you notice him? Princely, simply princely!'

The man, who seemed about thirty, having bowed, still remained standing hat in hand in the cool east wind.

'Pray put on your hat,' said the elder lady. 'Where have you been, Mr. Joynte—for a walk? Allow me to present to you my young friend Miss Dorothy Strait.'

"A dream of beauty," he murmured, in a voice intended only to reach Mrs. Parkinson, as he bowed again.

Dorothy heard it, however, and it made her feel uncomfortable.

'May I be permitted to walk a few paces with you?' continued Mr. Joynte. 'I have been breathing the air, and enjoying the beautiful scenery'—he waved his hand around

as if to call attention to it—'thinking of my misfortunes, of my blighted life, and of course of your kindness, madam.' He turned at these words respectfully towards Mrs. Parkinson, who could scarcely conceal her satisfaction. 'This young lady knows your kindness, of course, knows the immense beneficence which you exert on behalf of all kinds and classes of men—myself, for instance, who at your amiable request have left my home in the miserable garret which is all I can call my own, in order to enjoy your hospitality.'

'Don't!' murmured Mrs. Parkinson humbly.
'I can do very little, and your story is indeed a thrilling one.'

By this time they had reached the Angel House, and Miss Strait shook hands with her friend, while she stood on the grey old step that led into the garden exchanging a parting word.

Mr. Joynte scrutinized her closely, and appeared to be much struck with her beauty.

'Handsome as one of my own countrywomen,' he said to Mrs. Parkinson, as the two strolled homewards.

'Yes, she is a great favourite of mine,' the good lady responded with eagerness—'a great favourite of mine. I am so glad she is about to make a great marriage.'

- 'Ah, indeed,' said Mr. Joynte—carelessly, stroking his bristly moustache; 'a local personage, I suppose—a lord, perhaps? There are a good many lords in this country, I perceive.'
- 'No; a rich landowner—a Mr. Keith Chester.'
- 'Keith—Keith Chester!' said the American, turning suddenly pale; 'a dark man, who was at Rome?'
- 'Yes, the same; he was a diplomat, I believe.'
- 'I know. So the scoundrel is here, and marries that pretty girl—damnation!'

Mrs. Parkinson looked shocked, and edged a little away from her protégé.

'Excuse me, ma'am. I knew the man once, and the fact is—you astonished me—we Americans have a habit of using bad language. I beg your pardon again. You are so good a lady, it is very wrong in me to shock your sense of propriety.'



CHAPTER XIV.

MRS. PARKINSON DOES HER DUTY.

sighted; nevertheless, she was considerably moved at the strange excitation displayed by Mr. Joynte at the mere mention of Keith Chester's name. She endeavoured to obtain further information from the American, but he contented himself by remarking that it was no affair of his, that Keith was a priggish puppy, and other words to the same effect; but that, nevertheless, he supposed it might be a very good marriage for a young lady. Mrs. Parkinson, puzzled but unconvinced, was forced to give up her questioning.

That something more lay beneath Mr. Joynte's half-careless, half-flippant manner, she realized intuitively—so much so, that,

feeling disturbed in her mind, she determined to call on Mrs. Strait, and confide to her the vexation she had experienced. The American's habits were somewhat unconventional. He rose early, drank a cup of tea, and sallied out of the house with a big cigar in his mouth, returning only at dinner-time; again walking out after that meal, which he appeared to enjoy heartily, until tea-time. Where he went, or what he did, Mrs. Parkinson had no idea of: and, hampered by her kind and timid nature, she dared not ask. In one respect this was convenient. She could thus pay visits unnoticed and unaccompanied by her strange guest.

The day after the committee-meeting was Thursday. Mrs. Strait, methodical even in her vagueness, which was rather the vagueness of a mind unable to grasp more than one detail at a time, than a natural dislike to order and method, generally stayed at home on Thursday and looked over the linen. She was a beautiful needlewoman, and prided herself on the way she kept it. Mrs. Parkinson could therefore count on her presence at home, and, in addition, on the probable absence of her daughters—the latter an important clause in the success of her little plan.

The kindly widow, neatly dressed, and with the black lace scarf as usual tied under her chin, giving her the appearance of some dowdy Spanish woman who had forgotten the crimson flower for her hair—having kissed the cats and commended them specially to the faithful Eliza's care—proceeded briskly on her way to Mrs. Strait's house. She found all the conditions favourable—the girls out and Mrs. Strait alone, sitting upstairs in the spare bedroom, where the afternoon sun streamed brightly in, engaged in mending a quantity of fine linen that was spread out before her.

'Busy as usual?' said Mrs. Parkinson brightly, sitting down on a pile of freshlymended towels.

'Needlework is the proper occupation for women, my dear,' placidly answered Mrs. Strait. 'My girls won't take to it. Dear, dear! What is coming to the world? What is the good of a woman who can't darn her own stockings, or make a shirt? My girls can't make a shirt—never could. Dorothy reads and Margaret plays the piano; but, I say, what's the use of it all? Darn, mend, sew—then a woman knows she is doing her duty, and feels happy.'

- 'Dorothy is, I hear, satisfactorily provided for,' said Mrs. Parkinson, plunging boldly into her subject. 'She is going to be married that's nice.'
- 'Going to be married—yes, I believe so!' Mrs. Strait rested her head on her hands meditatively. 'Who told you so? But I suppose it's all over the parish by this time. She's been engaged some days; and what I am to do about the trousseau I am sure I don't know. They say underlinen has to be edged with Valenciennes lace now, top and bottom, even flannel petticoats. And then the gowns—oh dear! And Dorothy so improvident and clever!'
- 'Don't trouble yourself about the gowns; I am sure Dorothy is very sensible. But just think of the comfort you will have in your son-in-law—a good, steady, high-principled man. For, of course, you are certain he is all that?'
- 'Well, I don't know, I'm sure.' Poor Mrs. Strait looked puzzled. 'I asked Dorothy if he was a Churchman, and she said he was. And he visited Mr. Maynard, I remember, the first thing when he arrived.'
- 'But you know he bears a good character? You have inquired after his antecedents?'

- 'No, indeed; he is a gentleman, not a servant. He is very rich—has a position.'
- 'But, Mrs. Strait, his character—that is the chief point to be considered.'
- 'I can't write for it, can I, and find out if he is sober, honest and respectable?'
- 'No; but you can make inquiries. He seems to have dropped from the skies. Where has he been, what has he done, for the last eight years—do you know? No one I know here has seen him for years—not since his mother's death.'

Mrs. Strait reflected. What did she know of him beyond that he was rich and good-looking, and that the young people loved one another? It seemed as if a careful mother could require no more.

'Do you happen to know anything against him then?' she asked a little pettishly, the grievance of the trousseau fading into insignificance beside the possibility of her daughter's losing the chance of so brilliant a marriage.

'Yes; I think I do.'

Mrs. Parkinson's kindly lips hesitated to speak the words, but she loved Dorothy dearly. The child must be saved at any cost if she were in danger.

- 'Then say it out, please, at once, and don't make mysteries. I hate mysteries. I always tell the girls, "Whatever you do, my dears, don't let us have mysteries. They invariably bring on my palpitations." If you know anything against Mr. Chester which, I must say, seems most unlikely—let me hear it.'
- 'It is very difficult, for the stories are only hearsay; but I should advise you to find out for yourself.'
- 'Find out for myself, indeed. Not I! Besides, the Bible says we ought not to tattle about our neighbours, and Blackness has been in his family for years.'
- 'Well then, ask Mr. Chester boldly whether he knows a man called Elias F. Joynte, and see what he says.'
- 'And suppose I insult him by the question, and he breaks off the marriage then and there—who will find me another husband for my girl, my foolish, dreamy Dorothy?'
- 'Better anything than that dear sweet Dorothy should be made unhappy.'
- 'Really, Mrs. Parkinson,' said her friend a little tartly, continuing to stitch vigorously at a table-cloth, 'I don't quite see how you, never having been a mother, can know what a mother's behaviour ought to be. But then,

the world's always against a poor widow with pretty daughters. "From him that hath little, shall be taken away even that he hath." It is the old story of Cain and Abel—envy and hatred, and nobody caring for the poor and helpless.'

'I care very much. I only want you to do nothing in a hurry—to make inquiries—to be prudent. You are careful of your linen.'

Mrs. Parkinson took up the corner of a towel gingerly between her finger and thumb, and appeared to admire the exquisitely neat marking upon it.

'Girls are not linen, Mrs. Parkinson; they have their feelings.' Mrs. Strait stitched even more determinedly.

'So have we all, my dear friend. Ah! I know of such sad cases—such ill-assorted marriages—where the husbands took to drinking and the wives to worse.'

'Now, Mrs. Parkinson, I won't have my girls compared to your pauper objects of charity; they may not be very handy at their needle, but they are ladies to the backbone, not beggars.' Mrs. Strait pulled her cap, which was already awry, still further towards a right angle with her forehead as she spoke. 'They have been brought up as well as I could

afford; and what with my lonely position and the heavy taxes, and no society to speak of, I think it very indelicate of you to taunt me as you have done about my not caring for them—a mother's feelings, "Rachel weeping for her children," Mrs. Parkinson, that's how I understand it.'

Mrs. Strait's usually plaintive voice now broke into sobs, and she flung her work on the table with energetic despair.

'Don't take on so, dear; we all have our troubles, said Mrs. Parkinson soothingly. 'Even that interesting young man down at my house, who has been misunderstood and persecuted all his life—a man whom I look on as a hero and a martyr—even he has had his crosses. Ah yes! Life is indeed sad for us all; but now cheer up, and see what is best to be done about your girl's marriage. There is never a cloud without a silver lining, you know; and all may be well yet.'

'The silver lining is a good marriage; if you take that away, and with it all my hopes of a happy peaceful old age, what is to become of me? Dorothy will fret herself into a consumption. Mr. Chester will abuse me, and the neighbours will laugh.' At this melancholy vision Mrs. Strait, vividly contemplating

her own misfortunes, covered her face with her hands and cried quietly.

Mrs. Parkinson sat aghast. She regretted having caused her friend sorrow (though, knowing that she had done so in a righteous cause, and with the very best intentions, she could not repent of her action); but the exceeding convolutions of Mrs. Strait's mind, which rejoiced in involved reasoning, rendered it very difficult to offer advice or assistance.

'Will you authorize me to make inquiries about Mr. Chester, and abide by my advice?' she asked presently, the pause, during which Mrs. Strait's tears fell regularly, having given her time to think.

'No, I will not. I will not have my daughter's happiness tampered with. I will not have her the talk of the town. The match shall be broken off—she will die. It will not matter, however, nothing matters; even the linen can be given up. I will sacrifice myself, sacrifice is the widow's portion.'

Mrs. Parkinson rose. Further argument seemed hopeless. Turning on the threshold she said kindly, 'Do let me help you in any way that I can. I love Dorothy as a daughter.'

'As if you could do so, when you are not

even her stepmother,' Mrs. Strait said angrily, beginning to wipe away her tears. The vexation she experienced at the interference of others always bore fruit in some petty show of tyranny, the revenge of a weak person upon her dependents; so that when, a few moments after Mrs. Parkinson's departure, Dorothy, radiant, with a touch of spring-like happiness, pushed the door open, and stealing pleasantly up to her mother's side, dropped a kiss upon her forehead, her doom was quickly decided—she must be the scapegoat.

- 'Mamma, have you been crying?' Dorothy asked in a tone of surprise, when, patting Mrs. Strait's faded cheek, she found that her fingers had become moist. 'What has happened?'
- 'Oh! you don't love me, child—you can't love me, or you would not have set your affections on a bad man.'
 - 'A bad man, mamma! whom do you mean?'
- 'Your lover, Mr. Chester; everyone says he is bad.'
 - 'Who says so, mamma? it is not true.'
- 'Now, that is so like you, Dorothy, to set yourself up to be wiser than your elders. What do you know of him?—nothing—positively nothing!'

- 'I know that I love him, and that he loves me,' said Dorothy simply, putting both her hands endearingly on her mother's arm, as she knelt beside her.
- 'Stuff and nonsense! Love is nothing. I don't believe you can love him *very* much. Why, you have only known him a month.'
- 'I can't argue, mother, 'but please let me marry him; please try to like him, for my sake.'
- 'I grant you, Dorothy, he is very rich'—Mrs. Strait was a little mollified as she remembered what riches meant—pleasures for the young, comforts for the old, and a kind of sunshiny transformation of life, in which new linen could be bought whenever necessary, and subtly increasing rents need not cause intense and abiding consternation. 'He is rich, but there end his merits. He may have a bad temper——'
- 'Mr. Coote said that Keith was very good-humoured.'
- 'Then he may have led a fast life. You have no conception of the wickedness of towns. The stories your papa used to tell me about them were horrifying. What can we know? Rumour is always right.'
 - 'Oh, mother! Why should we torture

ourselves with doubts? Why not believe? It is so much happier for us all.'

'Happier—happier, perhaps, but foolish too, and I never was a fool. The upshot of it is, I refuse my consent, Dorothy, till I know all Mr. Chester's antecedents—and that he is above suspicion, like Cæsar's wife. I have no doubt Cæsar was a business-like man, and knew what he was about.'

'If you are determined that there shall be some cause to blame him,' Dorothy said sadly, 'it may perhaps be found. But why try? It will only make me miserable.'

'There is my duty as a mother.' Mrs. Strait glanced round on the scattered linen, and the pile of towels that on Mrs. Parkinson's departure had fallen in confusion to the ground, and her tone increased in dignity. 'There is my duty as a mother!'

Dorothy still continued to hope; youth is so sanguine; besides, she was well acquainted with her mother's swiftly changing moods; the next new-comer might produce an entirely different result.

- 'Mother, you will do nothing,' she said at last.
- 'Nothing; except forbid Mr. Chester the house till further notice.'

- 'Oh, mother!'
- 'Dorothy, you must be obedient. It is for your good.'
- 'I may see him once?' The girl's face lost its sunny brightness, and looked piteously sad. Her clear blue eyes gazed out through a veil of tears.
- 'Yes. once.' Mrs. Strait felt perfectly satisfied now that she had amply done her duty. She had vindicated her authority. proved her wisdom, and given evidence of her maternal anxiety. It was very unselfish indeed of a woman to hesitate on the verge of so excellent a marriage for her daughter. It proved conclusively that she was not of the stuff of mercenary mothers, who place the acquisition of fortune as the aim of their ambitions. Her neighbours might be astonished, but there would be no occasion given for sneers or laughter. Mrs. Strait firmly believed that the sacrifice of inclination to principle was all on her side; Dorothy's feelings naturally counted as of secondary importance. Girls, in her opinion, were always in love-in and out again, like the turns of a weathercock; but they did not get the option of a rich marriage every day.

Mrs. Strait, like many other persons, believed Vol. 1. 14

herself to be eminently unworldly, but yet the opinion of the world, as exemplified in the person of Mrs. Parkinson, was the motivepower of her conduct. Unworldliness does not always mean 'other worldliness.' It may be either an imperfect vision of social wisdom or an ignorance of the accepted trifles that make up conventional life.

Dorothy, disheartened, walked to the window. She could see the tradespeople's carts hurrying by, the drivers whipping up their swiftly tripping ponies, and hear them loudly whistling the last popular airs. The milkman with his bright cans stood at the gate gossiping with the servant-maid, while he poured the frothing liquid into the brown stone jug she held; in the meadow beyond the road cows lowed patiently, waiting to be driven home; and the trill of a lark's song, far away in the blue distance, seemed to mock her with its throbbing burst of ecstatic joy. The familiar sights and sounds made the girl's heart ache. A few moments before she too could have sung for joy like the lark; but now her mood was that of keenest disappointment.

She turned her head and looked back again into the room: the neat paper, across whose

snowy surface trailed bunches of blue violets, and the white dimity bed-curtains, gave it a pleasant aspect. Her mother sat sewing again placidly. Soon Margaret would come in, and then there would arise fresh questions, surprise, explanations. Dorothy, thinking thus, leant her hot head against the cool window-pane, full of listless desire to see how long the milkman's talk with the maidservant would continue. The jug was full at last; it needed steadying carefully with both hands. The milkman jumped into his little donkey-cart and drove off with a jingle of bells.

Was it possible, Dorothy mused to herself, that her marriage could be broken off; that her future could lack the dear presence which now made the sunshine of each passing hour; that the slow lagging days should go by empty of happiness and everything but memory, the bitter aching memory which, like that of some grieving pain that never ceases, alone would remain to canker her life—a life, as in the past, monotonous and quiet; Margaret singing the 'Cloches de Corneville,' Mrs. Strait working, Dorothy herself reading history or literature, questions innumerable rising to her lips which none of her companions could answer; and so

time slipping by, miserable time slowly drifting into eternity. Could this be so? There certainly seemed the possibility. Miss Patten herself perhaps, acidulated and tedious as she was now, might have had her romance once, something to do with a young man whose miniature, with high stock, and velvet-collared coat, hung over the old maid's writing-table-might also have stood as Dorothy did on some quiet afternoon in the ruddy setting sun, and bid a silent farewell to hope and happiness, and the delight of whispered sympathy; and then, having locked up a drawer containing a letter, and a wisp of hair or a faded flower, have turned to face the world again—an old maid. Dorothy shuddered. Give up Keith; never again hear the music of his slow, liquid, ultra-refined tones; never again read her own thoughts in his concentrated reflective eyes; never again thrill to the sound of passion in his earnest words, words that sent the blood throbbing up from her heart into her cheeks; have nothing of all this but a remnant of poor pallid memory—never!'

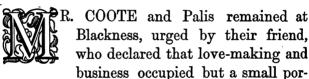
Dorothy slipped out of the room and fled to her own little bed-chamber. There, on her knees, pressing Keith's photograph to her lips, she registered as solemn a vow as ever escaped from a maiden's breast, that nothing—neither pressure, entreaties, nor menaces — should induce her to give up her lover, and, with him, all distinct prospects of happiness.





CHAPTER XV.

MR. MAYNARD DOES HIS DUTY.



tion of the day, and that the evening hours especially would be intolerable if he were left in solitude. Since Mr. Chester's return, April had slowly drifted into May; the country lanes were sweet with the breath of hawthorn, the cottage-gardens blooming with wallflowers and daffodils; village lovers lingered near the stiles, while gentle winds fanned their hot cheeks. Johnnie pursued such field-sports as the season warranted, and Keith read La Rochefoucauld by the open window, while Palis chanted in a loud voice, pacing bareheaded up and down, the passionate Provençal ballads in which his soul delighted.

For almost the first time in his busy life, Keith in these days felt a quiet content steal over him, a sense as if some one had mesmerized him into pleasant repose. The knowledge of Dorothy's love delighted him, but the delight was calm, unemotional, and grateful—as unruffled as the waving curves of her glossy golden hair.

'This is the true dolce far niente,' he said, stretching himself lazily, to Palis, who stood in the window-frame, a volume of poems in his hand. 'It is really as enjoyable as the life in Italy—more so than the summer season there, when one is broiled. I begin to feel as if I should settle down into a patriarchal existence, breed flocks and herds, and cultivate grand-children. This is really a pretty place.'

He was right. The spring and autumn are delightful in England, when the spring is genial and the autumn a kind of tardy summer. The lawn was of a deep rich green, the flower-beds gemmed with spring flowers, the air full of languor and of that kind of potent earth-smell which is so characteristically British.

'Love makes all things pretty,' Palis answered, a trifle sententiously, between the

whiffs of his cigarette. 'I never knew you so completely infatuated by a woman as you are on this occasion. Is it true she is exceptionally handsome?'

'And good, Raphael. The goodness of women never appealed to me before.'

'Well, I like a bit of diablerie in a woman, a touch of spice—black sparkling eyes, a neck just gilded by the sun's warm rays, lips that are red as cherries.'

'That comes of the poetry of your nature. That is the kind of thing you put into your verses; but depend upon it, Raphael, the woman we love *pro tem*. is always the type we believe most admirable. Show me your last effusion.'

'Ah bah! it's all rubbish, about some flowers.' He drew from his pocket a crumpled bit of paper and handed it to his friend. 'Probably you would not appreciate it. These things come to me at all times, sometimes at dinner, sometimes in dreams, sometimes in the fields. This one came to me in my old aunt's ear-trumpet. It is a buzzing kind of affair—one never hears the real words; and then other fancies enter my brain instead—but you, of course, are not sentimental.'

Keith took the paper and read:

'Oh night, last night of first caress!
Oh night of close ungloved adieu!
Oh night of first sweet given flower,
Warm with your wearing, full of you!

'Forget-me-not, a little rose,
And some strange blossom, fleshly white,
A tropic thing that, as we sat,
Blew like a hot breath in the night.

'To-day I walk as in my sleep,
I totter and I catch my breath;
Your flowers are here, for ever here,
Broken with kisses, loved to death.

"Forget-me-not." Can I forget—
I, in my aching want of you?
A rose—ah me, the thorns are set
Thick in my heart and sting me through!

'I never can understand you, Raphael,' he said, when he had finished reading it aloud, looking at Palis, who beat time with his foot to the metre of the verse, 'you are so extraordinarily romantic and so intensely practical. You always get on in the world, and make a success of everything you touch. You're a capital journalist; you seize the exact gist of a subject as it appears to the public. You speak well; you might be in Parliament if you chose.'

'That would bore me to death,' his friend interrupted. 'The routine of the House of Commons is too sleepy for me.' He stretched out his arms and made the joints of his fingers crack. 'I must have excitement, agitation,

variety; that is the secret of my character—change. I really feel the passionate enthusiasm for a cause I take up—I become the most ardent patriot for the time being and a cosmopolitan. I really suffer with the criminal I am writing about, I understand all the agony of the condemned wretch in his cell; I share his remorse, his despair, his misery, and almost feel the halter, and then the next day I have forgotten all about it. I really am the most earnest man in the world, only I can't keep up the sensation; it passes like sea-sickness. Now you are not earnest.'

'That's true,' said Keith. 'I always agree with La Rochefoucauld: "Dans l'adversité de nos malheurs amis nous trouvons toujours quelque chose qui ne nous déplaît pas;" and on hearing of their misfortunes, I turn my mind to a contemplation of my own good fortune. Some people would call that gratitude to Providence, eh?'

'Of course they would; the world is so narrow-minded. Truth is so disagreeable. I maintain, if you have anything unpleasant to relate, it is necessary to embroider. "Gasez, gasez toujours, avec de la gâze on peut tout faire."'

'Yes, that's it—lime-lights and distance.

It is the naked realities of life that are objectionable.'

'I can't imagine you a married man, Keith.' Palis removed the cigarette from his mouth and gave a long stare at Mr. Chester's recumbent figure. 'You are too self-conscious. You will never be content with the admiration of one woman, however hearty that may be; and women can admire, that's certain, when they love.'

"Le plus grand miracle de l'amour c'est de guérir de la coquetterie," murmured Keith between his teeth. 'How wonderfully you and I have always agreed!'

'Yes; because we are so utterly different,' laughed Raphael, the sun dancing on his auburn beard and catching into relief the bright gold threads among the brown. 'I, who am not even an Englishman—only a naturalized one.'

'What are you, Raphael? I never thought of asking you before.'

'Well, my mother was a German—that accounts for my blond head; my father a Provençal—that accounts for my nature, which is southern; and I have always lived in England, which is the key to my practical conduct; and this climate, dull, dreary, and

treacherous, accounts quite naturally for my yearning for bonbons and sunshine; the latter is a disease with me. England is a very good country to amass your money, attain to fame, or make a career; but the south is the only place to live in.'

'I shall live there too, some day.'

'Never; you will live where your wife chooses. She has the true English character—quiet, self-controlled, "un peu triste," with a strong will and an enormous capacity for loving. They have that, those English girls; it is a sign of health with them, like a good appetite.'

'Don't you think her beautiful?' said Keith; for, next to talking about one's self, there is no pleasure like that of hearing praise of the beloved. 'Resembles a Fra Angelico angel, doesn't she?'

'Yes; a Fra Angelico angel with a will. That young lady won't be contented with singing psalms and spreading out graceful drapery on a fleecy cloud. I hope to goodness she will go on believing in you, Keith, or there will be the devil to pay.'

'No fear!' said Mr. Chester, throwing back his head with a touch of conscious vanity.

- 'Why shouldn't she? I am going to be a paragon.'
 - 'As you were with Ida?'
- 'Leave Ida alone, please! By-the-bye, Raphael, a man doesn't always want every little item of his bachelor life ransacked and brought to light. You are a staunch friend, are you not? I mean, no gossiping with old women.'
- 'Of course not, mon cher. In an extreme case I should lie, and lie delicately and effectually; there should be no blundering about it. Why, who is this? The parson! Looks important, too, as if he were coming to beg for a subscription. Your genteel beggars really are assommants.'
- Mr. Maynard now approached, stepping firmly across the velvety lawn, his long black garment fluttering open as he walked. Keith rose slowly from his luxurious rocking-chair, pushed aside the glass of brandy and sodawater that stood at his elbow, and hastily covered the yellow-backed French novels, whose titles and contents could scarcely be considered edifying, with the sheets of the *Times* newspaper. Appearances were to Keith what principles are to other men, a necessary part of conduct. He stepped out of the French

window, and advanced with outstretched hand towards the priest.

'I am glad to see you, Mr. Maynard. This is the first visit you have paid me.'

'Not the first visit, but the first time I have found you at home.'

'Ah, yes, precisely; almost the same thing. Will you come into my room? I must apologize for the confusion of a bachelor's abode.'

'I think I should prefer to remain out of doors,' said the priest gravely, while Palis stood apart with an air of humility, as though to mark his complete indifference to other people's private conversation.

'As you please. You have not seen the garden yet. Will you take any refreshment?'

'Thank you, no; it is still early in the afternoon. And the fact is, I have a message for you—something a little unpleasant.'

'Indeed!' Keith elevated his brows and threw a knowing glance at Palis, as though to say, 'You see these priests are always birds of ill-omen.' Then he courteously added: 'Let us walk down the garden.'

They paced, at first in silence, under the shelter of the old elm-trees, in which rooks

were cawing. Then Mr. Maynard, seeing his task was in no way to be lightened for him, observed:

'I come from Mrs. Strait, as her ambassador.'

Keith twitched together a little with an almost imperceptible movement.

'Of course; then I need not ask if it is as an ambassador of peace. I was intending to call on Mrs. Strait myself in about half an hour. Your business is not very pressing, I suppose?'

'Mrs. Strait has begged me to speak to you on a very delicate matter. She fears to entrust her daughter's happiness to anyone who is not entirely worthy of her. She believes you to be worthy, but she feels that circumspection before taking so serious a step is necessary.'

'Of course. Does Mrs. Strait wish to know the amount of my fortune? My man of business will attend to that; I mean to make an ample settlement on my wife.'

'It is not that—no one doubts your generosity. But unpleasant rumours have reached Mrs. Strait's ears, and she would like you to contradict them.'

'Unpleasant rumours,' echoed Keith, twisting his moustache; 'of what kind?'

'There is a man here named Elias F. Joynte, who has let fall hints against your character, and who, it seems, is prepared to substantiate them.'

'Joynte! Impossible!'

If the priest's eyes had not been fixed on the soft grass he was treading he must inevitably have noticed Keith's sudden and ghastly change of colour.

'He says,' pursued Mr. Maynard, 'nothing definite; but other coinciding circumstances point to some blot or stain—some occurrence at Rome connected with your rapid increase of fortune. Can you explain it?'

'Perfectly. I was engaged to a young American lady. She died and left me her fortune.'

- 'Died suddenly, did she not?'
- 'Yes, very suddenly-of heart disease.'
- 'People talked——'
- 'Yes; as they always do. Now, Mr. Maynard,' Keith spoke with an almost jaunty frankness, 'you are a good man and a clergyman; you have no doubt constantly seen instances of envy and malice among your parishioners at the sight of their neighbours' superior good fortune. You surely would not be so unjust as to accuse a man solely

because he happened to be fortunate and to have drawn a prize in life?'

Keith played a good card in this apparent impulsive frankness of his. The priest wavered in his suspicions.

'It is no affair of my opinion,' he said; 'I know nothing, and of course can accuse you of nothing. But it seems easy to clear up the matter; a little frankness, Mr. Chester, is a valuable possession. I fear men of the world scarcely attach enough importance to it—I mean the transparent sincerity of intentions as well as of actions.'

'Well, certainly,' said Keith, still more frankly, 'I do not profess the simplicity—the purity, shall we say?—of a girl of eighteen. Life leaves a few rough traces on all of us, and I never aspired to be a saint; still, that is no reason why I should be accused of crimes, for I suppose you mean to insinuate something grave.'

'I fear the accusations are grave,' the priest answered in a low faint voice. Sin, notwithstanding his experience, always appeared to him on each new occasion as something astonishingly awful, which even the grace of God and a life of tears and repentance scarcely availed to wipe away.

- 'May I ask what is the definite crime of which you charge me? Of course I need not add that you have no power or right whatsoever to ask these questions, and that if I answer them it is only because I choose, or rather because I love Dorothy.'
- 'And you will lose her if you do not answer them—Mrs. Strait has irrevocably decided this. The charges then are: obtaining money under false pretences; and in some way of being answerable for the mysterious death of your intended, in consequence of which it is supposed that you left the diplomatic service very suddenly.'
- 'Ah!' Keith breathed a sigh of relief.
 'No one can prove a tittle of this, except that I left the diplomatic service, certainly, because I was sick of it, and because I was rich. Do you know who Joynte is?—have you any idea?'
- 'He says he is a cousin of the deceased lady, who has fallen on evil days.'
- 'Yes. What kind of evil days? He is a spendthrift, a prodigal, an adventurer, a lunatic, for he was once locked up as insane. I believe he thought his cousin's money should by rights have been left to him, and that is why he naturally loathes me. He

wrote a scurrilous article against me in one of the Roman papers, which, however, no one believed; and there you have the origin of the ugly rumours that have so disturbed you.'

Keith paused, his speech had somewhat excited him, his eyes sparkled, and there was a suspicion of trembling in his hands. The clergyman stopped and looked him full in the face, tracing little circles on the gravel-path, on which they now stood, with the tip of his square-toed boot, as he did so.

'You have spoken well, Mr. Chester, and there seems a true ring in your words. Will you meet Mr. Joynte at my house and decide the matter at once, that your bride's suspense may not continue?'

'Yes, and besides,' continued Keith, warming with his subject, 'I have another friend here who can speak for me—a journalist, a very able, intelligent man—you saw him there just now by the window—a stout, fair man, wearing a soft wideawake. He will speak for me. He will give me a character if—I require one, as it seems,' he added bitterly.

The two men now turned towards the house, outside which, among the enervating odours of the orangery, whose doors stood wide open, filling the air with narcotic sweetness, Palis

still walked slowly backwards and forwards, his book in his hand.

- 'Here, Raphael, come here!' Keith cried, as they drew near. Palis closed his book, keeping his finger and thumb between the leaves to mark the place, and advanced towards them, a pleasant smile lightening his broad contented face.
- 'Speak for me, Raphael!' Keith said in quick, hurried tones that vibrated with emotion—'am I a murderer, am I a scoundrel, a forger, an "escroc"! This gentleman accuses me of these things. Speak for me.'
- 'Mr. Chester accused of all this?' Palis looked with dignity at the quiet clergyman, who was beginning to doubt the evidence of his own senses. 'Never! I have known Keith—how long, seven—eight years, isn't it? We have never had a word, a quarrel, a misunderstanding in all that time. Keith is a perfect gentleman, a little too dainty in his tastes, possibly not quite so cosmopolitan as I am, fastidious—certainly fastidiousness carried to an excess is a fault, perhaps—but he is musical, artistic to the core, a man incapable of a meanness—a true friend, a charming companion. Ah, if you had seen, as I have, the fine ladies in Paris running after him, one

insisting on his coming to her supper, the other begging and praying him to arrange her private theatricals; and then men of science, of considerable position, talking to him with respect, asking him for his views on politics, on literature, on art—he is well read, is Keith. It is quite a pity for him to bury himself here in this little out-of-the-way nook. It is all very beautiful, of course. Look at that orangery: for a moment, one could imagine one's self in the back-garden of an Italian villa; but yet it is all narrow, very narrow. A man of society, that is what Keith is par excellence—society adores him.'

As soon as a pause for breath on the part of the speaker enabled Mr. Maynard to interrupt him, he said decisively:

'That is not the question. I honour you, sir, for so warmly defending your friend. Everyone is aware of his talents and his charm of conversation; his career as a diplomat has amply proved that. What troubles the lady whose daughter he wishes to marry is his moral character. Can you speak to that? the other qualities are but dross compared to integrity and straightforward dealing.'

'Certainly,' Palis resumed, while Keith stood by silently, feeling his character safe in the hands of his friend. 'Certainly. A high standard of morality is the great requisite for a public man. You, as the minister of religion, cannot do otherwise than lay stress upon it; but Keith is moral. You are moral, are you not, Keith?'

'Did you never hear anything against Mr. Chester's character with reference to the money left him by a young American lady?'

'Never,' said Palis, glancing at Keith to see if he had taken the right cue.

'You never knew anything, either?'

'Never,' again emphasized Palis.

'Then, sir, I must wish you good-morning. All that you have had the goodness to tell me shall be duly repeated to Mrs. Strait, and receive all attention from her—that I promise you. And you, Mr. Chester, will kindly consent to meet Mr. Joynte at my house to-morrow, at twelve o'clock? Will that suit you?'

'Perfectly! You believe that I am terribly pained at the imputations that have been cast upon me. You will plead my cause with Mrs. Strait, will you not? You will deal with my fair fame as a clergyman and a Christian, will you not?'

Mr. Maynard was touched at Keith's humility, and at the emotion portrayed in his sad and persuasive voice.

'Remember, Mr. Chester, that we are told to "keep ourselves unspotted from the world." It is a precept we are too apt to forget in our vehement pursuit of happiness or success, till the day when our pride is humbled in the dust; but never fear, justice will and must prevail. I trust I shall have good news for you to-morrow.'

Thus saying, the clergyman bowed and departed, walking with his usual rapid and determined stride. Keith and Palis looked after the disappearing black figure till the corner of the house hid him from sight; then, as they returned to Keith's sitting-room, Palis said in a tone of vehement curiosity:

'What is it, Keith? For the life of me I could not understand a syllable of what he wished to find out; but I thought a wordy panegyric, with a few hints of fine ladies and great men thrown in, would be the most beneficial line to take for you. But what has happened?—You look worried.'

Keith had thrown himself again into his favourite rocking-chair, and thrust his hands back under his head, in an attitude of listless depression.

'The whole annoyance is due to that money. Upon my word, sometimes I'm sorry I ever got it. The envious brutes can't leave me in peace about it. Some one has been telling my future mother-in-law all manner of scandal, and she sent the parson to say the marriage must be broken off unless I am able to explain. Confound it! How can one convince people by a negative? It's the fellow who swears black is white who always get the best of it.'

- 'Les femmes, il n'y que ça,' muttered Palis
- 'Yes, indeed women are the worry of one's existence. And the worst of it is, that I want this one, just only this one, and then I vow I'll never look at a woman again.'
- 'But how did you behave to Ida Phaer?' asked Palis thoughtfully. 'Had you anything to do with her death? I can't myself understand how it could profit you, for she was very nice and very handsome.'
 - 'Yes; but she had green eyes.'
- 'Like me. Did you never notice the colour of mine?'
 - 'Rubbish! Have a cigarette?'
- 'Just for form's sake, Keith, tell me, please, are you quite innocent of all that parson accused you of?'
 - 'Of course. You are as bad as the rest,' he

said impatiently. Then, pulling out his watch, 'Five o'clock, I declare! I must go down and see my little Dorothy. She will be breaking her poor heart!'





CHAPTER XVI.

A GIRL'S RESOLUTION.

Keith that Mrs. Maynard had forbidden him the house for the present, but the young man had no intention whatever of receiving his dismissal in such cavalier fashion. From Dorothy's lips alone would he hear his doom, and her lips, he knew, would never pronounce it. So he set off to the Angel House with pretty nearly his usual joyful anticipations, and was scarcely surprised when the door opened almost before he had rung the bell, and Dorothy herself welcomed him.

'Come in here,' she said in a low whisper, her eyes shining wonderfully. 'I did not want the maid to see you, but mamma knows; she has permitted me to receive you. I am so glad you have come. I have been waiting and watching for the last hour.'

'Darling!' he said, with a grateful impulse, as he lovingly stroked her head. They had now come out of the decaying daylight and sat side by side on the deep, low sofa in the green drawing-room. The room was full The fire was not kindled, and only of shadow. the mellow rays of one small lamp, that had been prematurely lit, threw a halo of light round the two figures, and played at hide-andseek in the ripples of Dorothy's hair. After the emotions of the day—the anger, the bitterness, the wounded vanity that had tortured him for some hours, the peace of these quiet moments was inexpressible. The low-toned dusky surroundings, the half-subdued light, the silence, the delicate scented atmosphere, gratified his artistic sense, soothed him into ease, and increased the ardour of his love ten thousand-fold. Keith could not love vulgarly. His correct eye, his perfect taste, must always be satisfied.

'I am so glad you have come,' Dorothy murmured in cooing tones. He thought her manner held a softness and ardour that it had never before possessed. 'I did not know how I

should have endured another night of misery. Keith, they want to separate us.'

- 'I know; but it must not be.'
- 'No, it must not be,' she said, pressing closer up to him and throwing her head back on his shoulder; 'because—oh, Keith, I love you so!'

The thrill of passion that passed through her communicated itself to Keith. He did not speak. Words were unnecessary; caresses, the close contact of their hands, more eloquent.

- 'Yes? Then listen.' The part of stern decision seemed to be left to the girl to play to-day. 'They will accuse you heaven knows of what; I shall not believe them. They will part us; I shall not care. And when the time arrives, Keith, that you want me, I will come to you always!'
 - 'Always,' he repeated half stupidly.
 - 'Is it so—a pact, a bond? Then seal it.'

Setting aside her usual coyness, her reserve, the natural coldness that had made Margaret say of her, 'Dorothy has no soul,' she put her lips daintily up to his. He pressed them tenderly, gently, and kept his arm firmly round the golden head that had fallen on his

breast. There was no passion in him now, however; only the tenderest love and reverence, and a feeling of quiet satisfaction.

'Dorothy, I must tell you,' he said presently, when he felt a tear drop on his hand; 'perhaps I am not worthy of you. I ought to say——'

'No, don't tell me anything,' she said, putting up her hands to her ears; 'don't explain. I don't want to know anything but that I love you. I believe in you, and I am yours. Why should we spoil this happy hour by horrid words that may haunt me when we are apart? You and I have no need of explanations—have we, Keith?'

'No, dear.' And then Keith realized what is meant by 'the love that casteth out fear.'

'You will clear yourself, Keith. People will see how mistaken they were in their judgment. But if not——'

'Then?' he said, wondering how far this young maiden's love would take her in the thorny paths of doubt.

'Then I will marry you just the same.'

'And I will never cease to adore you, and repay you for your goodness and your faith,' he exclaimed, fervently pressing her in his arms.

In that embrace Dorothy forgot her dreams

of fame and ambition, and gave herself up for ever to be the willing slave of love. How many such women's lives are there in the worldwomen who live in and for a man, as Milton has represented Eve, 'He for God only; she for God in him; women whose vital energies are absorbed in another's career, whose heart never beats for themselves or their own hopes and desires, but who fling the whole force of passionate devotion into the incense they offer up to their sole idol—like Heloïse obstinately declining marriage, lest she should mar her dear one's prospects; or Heloïse obediently retiring into the shades of a dreary convent, taking with her a prematurely blighted life and the wreck of all her hopes; or Heloïse caring only for her lover's prosperity and humbly learning of him, notably her inferior as a Latin and Greek scholar, the arid study of harren dialectics. Women such as these seem endowed with every gift of nature and art solely in order that they may resign them all in one supreme effort of self-sacrifice.

So Dorothy felt at this instant as the bands of love tightened round her heart, and she remembered that those bands, once firmly riven by the Church, were, in her opinion, indissoluble. The very action of lifting her lips to his bore with it no light, frivolous caress, but signification, the consecration of a heart's offering to him whom she deemed best and wisest in the world. A few more tender words passed between them, a few more lowwhispered expressions and gentle breathings, and then Keith rose, half dazed, from a state of dreamful felicity, to leave the woman he loved, now verily, and indeed, and of her own consent and free-will, his bride. They made no future appointments; the girl, at least, was beckoned on by no vain words of hope: but she parted from him silently and solemnly, as on the eve of some heart-searching trial, supported by a quiet faith that defied disappointment. She let him out at the door, as she had admitted him, with a parting grasp of the and stood shading her eyes as she watched him tread the narrow path where the gravel crumbled beneath his feet, and pass through the low gate into the road beyond. Away out into the damp rising mists of evening, that curled in vaporous clouds about his head, he went alone. Yet not alone, for her heart went with him.

Keith walked at first somewhat slowly. Little lights began to glimmer in casementwindows, the shutters of shops were gradually

closed with a bang; belated children hurried home laughing and talking in the dusk. passed the smithy where glowed tongues of fire. and the strokes of the heavy falling hammer resounded; he passed the chemist's shop, its blue and red lamp, speaking of comfort and hope, shining out like a beacon, and stopped at the little white house in which Mr. Maynard lived. Something in its trim appearance reminded him of the calm, benignant nature of the man, of his large well-ordered mind. slow to believe evil. Why should Keith not go in and talk to him, seek his advice, and tell him how Dorothy loved him, and how they had vowed never to part? Why wait till tomorrow, and pass a night of sleepless misery? He paused to think, but the tramp of a footstep in the distance startled him, and he moved on. The person to whom the footstep belonged was approaching rapidly. looked up lazily to see if it were an acquaint-As the two pedestrians neared one ance. another, the man's eyes met his, and he recognised Joynte, his accuser. An impulse ran through his nervous well-knit frame, and tingled in the tips of his fingers. The road was solitary, the ditch deep. In self defencewho said it was a crime? Merely a grip, a

clutch, and the unwelcome accuser would be silent for ever. The impulse died away in a moment, but Keith felt mad with rage at the idea of an obstacle interposing itself between him and the woman whose love he was determined never to forego. However, he commanded himself, and in the quiet casual way one gentleman greets another whom he meets unexpectedly, he said, 'You here, Joynte!'

Joynte looked uneasily first at the ditch, then at the lithe and supple figure fronting him, for he was slight and weakly himself. Finally, in a tone of friendly deprecation, 'Ah, it's you, Mr. Chester! I hope you are well.'

'Well enough, but not thanks to you. What do you mean, you pale-livered sneak, by coming down here tale-bearing? Isn't Europe wide enough for you and me? Haven't I shown you that I am to be feared? How dare you! I'll hunt you down again if you venture to annoy me!'

'Mr. Chester, I have said nothing.'

The narrow gleam of intense hatred that darted from the corners of Joynte's half-shut eyes denoted plainly that no motives of love had deterred him from the unpleasant disclosure, whatever it might be.

- 'Then say nothing!' Keith cried threateningly.
 - 'Will you make it worth my while?'
- 'No; but I'll hunt you down, expose, and ruin you.'
- 'Two can play at that game,' the other answered. 'You have as much to fear from me as I have from you, I think.'
- 'I have nothing to fear.' Keith drew himself up to his full height, and looked at his foe with cool and cutting contempt. 'No one will believe you, whatever you say.'
- 'I have suffered enough through you already,' said Joynte, with a kind of shuffling humility. 'I might like to pay you out a bit.'
- 'By all means,' answered Keith haughtily.
 'You were always a coward and a bully. I see experience has not improved you.'
- 'When a man has lost everything, you ought to know well enough that he gets reckless.'
- 'Once a fool, always a fool, I suppose,' retorted Keith bitterly; 'but I strongly advise you to drop your present line of conduct.'
- 'Are you coming to the parson's to-morrow?' asked Joynte, beating indefinitely about

the bush in the hope of finding some loophole that would afford him a hold over the gibing Chester, cool and assured.

'Yes—to proclaim that you are an escaped lunatic.'

For a moment Joynte cowered.

- 'You can't.'
- 'I can. Where did you get those clothes? Did you steal them? How do you live? Why are you idle and well-dressed? Answer me all this!'

Keith spoke harshly and in a tone of command.

'They were given me. Oh! I have known bitter poverty, Mr. Chester. I have begged for a crust and slept under arches. God knows how low I have sunk since I escaped from that madhouse—and I wasn't mad. You know I only said what was true—what I saw. I've done all I could to earn money; there's nothing I haven't tried, and now——'

'Now you think to earn money by turning common informer. Pray do so, if you think that a more gentlemanly occupation; only not a sixpence do you get out of me, but board and lodging gratis—you know where!'

Keith's eyes flamed; all his late softness of manner had given place to condensed rage. He approached Joynte with uplifted stick.

'Mercy!' cried the wretch, his knees sinking under him.

'Ah! that's right, that's your proper position.' Keith breathed more freely. 'Listen! you will leave this place to-night. There is a train at nine o'clock. You will take it. You will go back to America at once, and you will never let me see or hear anything of you again. I suppose you have some relations there. My banker will pay you £200—I will write him to that effect; and six months hence, if I am not molested, I will pay you £200 more. Now go, and never let me set eyes on your cursed face again. You were a precious fool to stay in Europe at all.'

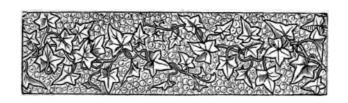
Joynte stumbled up on to his legs. The sum offered dazzled the miserable creature whose sole ambition it had lately been to earn ten shillings a week. Yes; on the whole, there was more to be gained from this man than from the parson: besides which, he did not particularly relish the close proximity of a determined athlete with an uplifted stick.

'I will go,' he said hoarsely, and pushing rapidly past Keith, he struck off into the shades of night.

Keith waited motionless for a few moments. that he might be quite sure the fellow was not shamming or stealing on him unawares from behind. Then he heaved a deep sigh, and walked briskly on. What a piece of good fortune had fallen to his lot! He had rid himself of the only person in the world whose presence just at this moment was peculiarly hateful to him, and that for the very moderate price of £200. About the other £200 it was scarcely necessary to think: the man might die before six months elapsed, and never This was a more than probable claim it. contingency, for his appearance was that of a delicate worn-out person. Two hundred pounds, only the price of a hunter, not the price of a picture, or of a diamond ornament to clasp round the neck of his bride; and with that price he had bought peace for ever, his own happiness and that of Dorothy.

Did this not prove clearly that courage was the only requisite for a man—courage and that coolness which enabled him to face danger calmly and decide rapidly in an emergency? Some people would have feared Joynte's malevolence, have trembled and despaired at the idea of averting it. But he, Keith, knew what he was about. Thank heaven he was not superstitious; yet he rejoiced to think that perhaps his birth had occurred in a fortunate conjunction of planets—that his star was a lucky one—that what might mean danger to others, for him only meant success. Arrived at home, he went straight into the blue-room, where Coote and Palis awaited him; Coote reading the *Field*, Palis with fat white fingers trying over on the piano some airs from the last new opera.

- 'How goes it, Keith?' Coote asked cheerily.
- 'Splendidly,' Keith threw himself into a chair, and proceeded to light a cigarette. 'It is all right; I shall marry her.'
- 'But how about the awkward interview to-morrow?' said Palis.
- 'You'll see. I have managed it rather neatly, I think. You two fellows will witness the utter discomfiture of the parson, and co-surprise of Mrs. Strait, delight of Dorothy. We'll have an extra bottle of champagne to-night, and drink to my success, and the perdition of every rogue who dares to obstruct my plans and thrust his miserable head into business that does not concern him.'



CHAPTER XVII.

ORDEAL BY TALK.

RS. MAYNARD, Mrs. Strait, and her daughter Margaret assembled in the parson's drawing-room on the morrow. Margaret had accompanied her mother in order to restrain her

panied her mother in order to restrain her feelings and support her if necessary; but Dorothy declined to make one of the party.

'I put my trust in Keith,' she said; 'and I should not like him to think I wished for the smallest explanation.'

'But you had better at least come and hear what happens,' urged Margaret; 'you can sit in the next room and be quite unobserved.'

'And be tantalized by the sound of voices, and excited by curiosity till I eventually come in. No thank you. I shall stay at home and read.'

So Dorothy had her way, and Mrs. Strait and Margaret went alone. Mrs. Maynard flitted gracefully in and out of the drawingroom, where sat this species of family council; a light of triumph gleamed in her soft brown eyes, which she strove in vain to hide by an assumption of bustle and anxiety. The whole morning she had been thinking to herself, 'I am going to teach him to despise the parson's wife, and think her not good enough for his prodigal feasts and bachelor entertainments.' Poor Mrs. Maynard! A dish of cutlets, a basket of grapes, and an hour's merriment offered to two pretty girls seemed scarcely worthy fuel to have lighted such a fire; but envy and anger are quickly burning stuff, and need little nursing of their flames.

'It is getting late,' she said, sitting down by Mrs. Strait, who filled a low armchair near the window, but had not hitherto spoken. 'They ought to be here. I wonder what detains them. My husband is waiting at the door to receive them, and everything is ready.'

'I trust they are not coming in here,' Mrs. Strait said, in a tone of peevish alarm. 'I don't want a scene from that young man.'

'I don't think Mr. Chester is likely to make

a scene,' observed Margaret, with a smile. 'Dorothy said he was perfectly quiet and self-possessed when he bade her good-bye at their last interview.'

Mrs. Maynard elevated her eyebrows.

- 'A last interview—and they were alone, I suppose? Was it not a trifle imprudent, Mrs. Strait?'
- 'My girl knows how to conduct herself,' said the lady addressed, severely, 'even though she was alone with her intended—which was more, certainly, than my blessed mother would have permitted me; but there—girls are different now, and everything is changed, too. I never thought, when I was young and happy and Mr. Strait alive, that I should have to pass through such an ordeal as this; but there—God's ways are inexplicable.'
- 'Here they come!' Margaret cried with a blush, shrinking back into the shelter of the tapestry curtain.

Keith came first, and behind him, like two attendant spirits, Palis and Coote. Palis had a white hat, an orange-coloured tie, and a light grey suit, and carried in his hand a cotton umbrella. The other two wore the plain dress of ordinary English gentlemen, relieved in Keith's case by the ornament of a Maréchal

Niel rosebud in his button-hole, which he had begged from Dorothy the day before. Mr. Maynard welcomed the three men cordially, but with gravity, and they presently took their places in the dining-room. Just across the narrow passage, only a few yards off, the beating hearts of the three women were almost audible. Mrs. Maynard was agitated for herself, Mrs. Strait for her daughter, Margaret for her mother and her sister. The weary moments passed but slowly. By way of breaking the painful silence, Mr. Chester admired a very old print that hung over the chimney-piece—an engraving from a picture of Titian.

'There are only two like it in Great Britain,' the Vicar said, pointing out some curious scroll-work at the corner, 'and the frame too is supposed to be very fine.'

'I can't bear old frames,' said Coote. 'Why should carving be more valuable because it is old, and gilding when it is dingy?'

'It is not the antiquity only, but the art of dainty and careful fashioning, of which our workpeople seem to have lost the secret.'

'I know that when I go into a bric-à-brac shop with Keith,' said his friend, 'and see something specially ugly, or dirty, or mouldy looking, I may be quite sure that will be the one

thing he values in the whole collection. "Perfectly unique, my dear fellow," he says; and I wish heartily it were unique, and that no more could be found like it.'

'Respect for antiquity is the development of the religious instinct,' said Palis, twisting his white hat between his fingers and thinking to please the parson. He would have said or done anything at this moment to propitiate the man whose verdict must decide Keith's fate. Palis was a sincere friend, though occasionally an indiscreet one.

'Ah, here comes Mrs. Parkinson!' the clergyman said, in a tone of relief (the strained silence and embarrassment of the gentlemen having become every moment more and more unpleasant); 'but she is alone. What does it mean?'

He hurried out to receive the little widow, who presently entered, looking as neat as a new pin, draped in her black lace, but flustered out of all ordinary conditions.

'Mr. Maynard, the most extraordinary thing has occurred!' she broke out. Then, suddenly perceiving the strangers, she gracefully dropped an old-fashioned courtesy towards the company. 'I have been waiting and hoping, and I am very late, and so sorry; but——'

- 'What has happened?' asked the clergyman gravely.
 - 'Yes, what?' said everybody.
- 'Mr. Joynte went out for a walk yester-day----'
 - 'And he lost his way,' suggested the Vicar.
 - 'He got drunk,' said Palis.
 - 'He has sprained his ankle?' asked Coote. Keith alone remained silent.
- 'He has not returned,' said Mrs. Parkinson emphatically. 'Eliza took him up some hot water to wash his hands last night before supper, as usual: but he never used it. We waited supper; then, at last, I began mine-about nine o'clock, you know, one is hungry. I went to bed, leaving the front door on the latch, and Eliza with orders to get up at once if she heard a noise; no one came. This morning I breakfasted alone. I waited till the last moment, and the cook had made such good ham-toast, it was a pity-Mr. Joynte had praised it before so particularly-and I thought on this occasion it might keep up his spirits. But no !—What can have happened ? Such a nice, quiet young man, too. I had just heard of a clerkship for him likely

to suit him. Oh dear!' the little woman stopped with a gasp.

'It is very strange,' said the Vicar gravely.
'Had you any suspicion that he was going away? Had you talked of it at all? Did he receive any letters?'

'Not a line—not a letter. We had never talked of it.' Here Mrs. Parkinson sank into the chair offered her by Mr. Chester, who alone, of all the party, appeared to have his wits about him. 'He did not seem particularly inclined to accuse Mr. Chester of anything; and when he heard you wished to see him here to-day, he said of course he would oblige you, being, you perceive, at least as he thought, a little indebted to me.'

Mrs. Parkinson hesitated like a schoolgirl. She never could be got to see that, with her philanthropic schemes and exertions, she did more than other people, and deserved to receive a larger meed of gratitude. Not that she often received it; few do. If we get our deserts, they are mostly the righteous punishment for our misdeeds.

'He was a little indebted to me, and so, of course, anxious to please the Vicar,' she continued apologetically; 'but he said he might have been mistaken—that perhaps Mr. Ches-

ter's faults were the follies of youth—that he did not like to condemn a friend, and such like.'

'The lying humbug!' muttered Keith between his teeth.

'And I'm sure something has happened,' summed up the good lady, with a sigh.

'Does not this appear very much like a withdrawal of the imputations cast on Mr. Chester, gentlemen?' asked the Vicar, looking round.

'Certainly it does; but I wish the cowardly sneak were here!' said Coote warmly, nursing his knee with his clasped hands. 'Fellows have no right to say things they can't substantiate.'

'I presume we may consider the investigation as terminated — in an unsatisfactory fashion certainly, but still it seems difficult to see what else can be done,' said the Vicar slowly. 'I will tell my wife what has occurred, and she will ask Mrs. Strait whether she is content, or if she wishes for further information.'

The Vicar then left the room, and a whispered conversation ensued between him and his wife in the passage. Presently he returned, with the announcement that Mrs. Strait was

considerably discomposed by the strange news, and that she would write to Mr. Chester, not feeling inclined to see him at present. Then the Vicar, taking Mr. Chester warmly by the hand, said:

'I trust this wretched affair may have no further unpleasant results. You must rejoice that you bravely and honestly submitted to meet the painful allegations of this man, for the mysterious disappearance of your accuser tells considerably in your favour. You have my warmest sympathy, and may be assured of all the help that, as a minister of God, I can give you.'

'Thank you,' Keith answered, looking manly and modest. 'I have an aunt in London, Lady Puddicombe, and a cousin, Sir Wykeham Whiteface. I will write to them, if you approve, to bear testimony in my favour.'

'Yes, that would be very wise,' the priest said kindly. 'Relations—powerful relations, always carry weight with the public.'

Keith did not add that Lady Puddicombe had not set eyes on him for ten years, and that, as he had belonged to the impoverished branch of the family, she had comparatively ignored him; nor that, from having been an arrant flirt in her youth, she was now become

a narrow-minded zealot, who never troubled about her relations except when it was possible to extract large subscriptions for charitable objects from their purses. Sir Wykeham Whiteface, on the other hand, was a sporting squire, who had married a cousin of Keith's father and lived among horses and dogs, knowing nothing whatever about gay young gentlemen or the scandals of foreign towns. They were both relations, however, and would serve his purpose as well as any others.

'I suppose Mrs. Strait will relent?'

'Probably; but, my dear young friend, it is well to be prepared for trials. Women's natures are more delicate and sensitive than our own; they are sometimes difficult to deal with. I will do my best.'

'Of that I am convinced,' answered Keith, feeling that he desired no better advocate than this honest, high-minded servant of God.

The gentlemen then severally made their farewells and departed.

'Where is Mrs. Strait?' demanded the little widow, when she was alone with the Vicar.

'In the next room. Come in and talk to her.'

Mrs. Parkinson stepped across the narrow passage into the drawing-room, where Mrs.

Strait sat rocking herself to and fro in her chair, while Margaret vainly strove to comfort her.

'I don't call that clearing himself,' Mrs. Strait said. 'I believe they are all in league against me. Where is that man, that Joynte, gone to? That's what I should like to know. How can we tell they are not all in a conspiracy?'

'You don't accuse me, surely?' said Mrs. Parkinson, advancing, with a flush on her face.

'I accuse no one. You have seen what comes of that; but I am not satisfied. You yourself sowed the seeds of suspicion in my mind, and I wish to be satisfied. I shall not give my consent at present.'

'What is your opinion?' Mrs. Parkinson turned anxiously to the Vicar. 'Is he worthy, do you think?'

'I don't find any fault in him, and I cannot from my own slight knowledge say he is unworthy; but it will perhaps be more prudent for us to await the letters of his relations, Lady Puddicombe and Sir Wykeham Whiteface, to whom he is going to write.'

'Yes; they are titled relations, you know, vol. i. 17

Mrs. Strait, and can have no object in deceiving us.'

Mrs. Strait vouchsafed no answer. She rose wearily, with the aid of Margaret's arm. 'I am going home now, Mr. Maynard; your plan does not seem to have answered, and I must think for myself. I fancied that, being a clergyman, your suggestions might contain wisdom, but I have not derived much benefit from them. I must think for myself. Comfort the widows in their affliction indeed!—No one has comforted me. Come, Margaret; it's dinner-time. I dare say you are hungry, and the joint is sure to be as black as a cinder; but there—we must be resigned.'

Mr. Maynard carefully attended her to the door, and watched her somewhat totteringly walk down the street, leaning on her tall daughter's arm. He sighed deeply. The troubles of his parishioners affected him unnecessarily. He blamed himself for carelessness or inattention if evil consequences resulted from his interference; and in the case of unexpected success, he never forgot to thank his Father in Heaven humbly on his knees. He might truly be said to 'walk with God,' for He was with him like a mighty presence, even in the quarrels of old women or the

ravings of a drunkard by whose ribald bed he watched. Thus broke up the famous family council, composed of so many heterogeneous elements, which had met to decide the fate of Keith.

- 'For my part, I am more convinced than ever that there is something queer about Mr. Chester,' confided the playfully affectionate Sophie to her husband, when Mrs. Parkinson, after much lamentation, had departed, and husband and wife were once more alone.
- 'My dear, why are you suspicious of human nature? Why not hope for the best?'
- 'Because I have seen the truth of the French proverb, "Il n'y a pas de fumée sans feu;" and because, if Mr. Chester had not done something of which he is ashamed, these stories would never have been whispered about. I wonder how much he paid that snivelling creature Joynte to take his departure? I am convinced it was all arranged."
- 'Oh, my dear—my dear!' said her husband reprovingly, 'do not give way to malice; and remember not to be late for the service this afternoon.'
- 'At which we shall all confess that we are "miserable sinners," all except Mr. Chester,' she said aggravatingly. 'I am sure he

doesn't look upon himself as a "miserable sinner."

But Mr. Maynard, believing that occasionally even for a clergyman silence is golden, hereupon, without a retort, took up his hat and departed.





CHAPTER XVIII.

AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

ND that's exactly what took place,' said Margaret, terminating the description of the scene at the clergyman's house which she had

been giving her sister with these words.

The three women sat together at luncheon, having dismissed the maid so as to be free to discuss affairs, unharassed by the fear of a servant's ear acquiring unpleasant knowledge, forthwith to be conveyed as a welcome sop to the greedy curiosity of the cook in her kitchen.

'What are your intentions now, mamma?'

Dorothy, making no reply to her sister's long speech, turned to her mother, occupied in idly fingering her knife and fork, and sought to read in her face the presence of hope and comfort.

'I cannot see what there is to be done,' said Mrs. Strait thoughtfully. 'You can't marry at present—everything is just as vague as it was. I never believed much in a kind of ordeal by talk, as the Vicar did—men do lie so; and in fact one can't blame them, if it is in self-defence. I remember your poor father used to say there wasn't a great man in history who always told the truth: Napoleon, Marlborough—I think he excepted the Duke of Wellington, but then he was a contemporary, and had just been buried with a big funeral and a great fuss, so he didn't count.'

'But, mamma, remember the letters Mr. Chester has promised to write to his relations,' said Margaret; 'I really don't see how any gentleman could have shown himself more anxious to court inquiry, or more open in his conduct—I really don't.'

Dorothy looked with glistening eyes at her sister as she uttered these words; her fond heart overflowed with gratitude for the least modicum of praise dealt out to the man she loved.

'Naturally we will wait for the letters,' decided Mrs. Strait, glad to find some definite condition of which she could take hold as an excuse for delaying her decision.

'May Keith not come here till then?'

'Certainly not. I don't wish people to say you were engaged to a man, and spent hours in his society, and then never married him after all; those kind of affairs only hurt a girl's reputation. You are very young still; you will soon learn to like some one else.'

'Never!' cried Dorothy impatiently.

It is impossible for youth to realize the bitter law of change. When young girls love, they imagine it is for ever; yet frequently, after the lapse of a few years they have married another man, and settled down into placid and comfortable mothers of families.

Mrs. Strait, dreading her daughter's persistence, and feeling equally persistent herself, hastily swallowed the last morsel of a fig that lay on her plate, and rose to go. The two girls now drew their chairs nearer together, and talked in an undertone.

'Mamma looks worried,' said Dorothy sadly. 'I am so sorry to be the cause of it; for she is far from strong.'

'She will be all right when you are married. Take my advice, Dorothy— if you care for Mr. Chester, stick to him; never be persuaded to give him up. It will, after all, only be a momentary fuss; and one can't quarrel for ever with a rich and prosperous woman.'

- 'You mean?' Dorothy opened her eyes wide.
- 'I mean I'm sorry the days of Gretna Green are past; they were very convenient, to be sure, but still there are always friends who can assist one. Mrs. Parkinson, for instance, and that Lady Darlington who wrote to you.'
- 'Yes,' said Dorothy, feeling in her pocket, 'hers was a very nice letter; but I never could do such a dreadful thing as that. You know we are told to obey our father and mother, and marriage would bring no blessing if one commenced it with a sin.'
- 'Oh, well, if you are so very punctilious there is no more to be said. Mr. Maynard has drilled you well—you will be taking the veil in a sisterhood next. All I know is, if I loved I wouldn't meanly forsake a man. "All is fair in love and war," and I would soon bring mamma round.'
 - 'No, I can't do that, Margaret. I can't indeed!'
- 'What on earth then is the use of all your reading, if you are as squeamish as a baby that does not know black from white!'
 - 'I shall wait—I can wait always.'
- 'And wait till your face is wrinkled and your hair grey, or else till he marries some one else, which is far more likely.'

Dorothy, at these words, felt a pang, for she remembered Christina Rossetti's sweet poem, and wondered in her heart whether, when Keith came to claim her, the same bride-song would be raised:

'Too late for love—too late for joy!
Too late—too late!'

But she smiled almost haughtily at the hint of his preferring another woman. He had stooped to pick her out, a lowly, simple girl. He loved her; 'twas not likely now that he would forget her! And so she comforted herself easily, and refused to listen to the sound of her sister's temptings.

In due time the answers to the letters Keith had addressed to his relations arrived, and were conveyed by special messenger in a carefully sealed envelope to Mrs. Strait. She was alone. Dorothy had gone to church, Margaret to tea with Mrs. Parkinson, and she had therefore full leisure to digest their contents. The first one she opened was from Lady Puddicombe, and ran as follows:

'200, Montague Square, London, May 10th.

'MY DEAR NEPHEW,

'Though by the wise dispensations of Providence we have been separated for many years, so that I have only been able to yearn after your soul, yet not to pluck it as a brand from the fire, I am glad to think you remember me, and seek for my advice in so momentous a question as that of marriage. St. Paul says, "It is better to marry than to burn," and "I would that the younger women marry;" so it is plain that you have the authority of Scripture for your intentions. I know nothing of Miss Dorothy Strait, but trust she is as good as you believe; though I do not approve of human beings, who are but miserable worms, making idols of each other. I have heard that you were an ornament to your profession, though I grieve to say it is a worldly one, and I can but imagine that any respectable family will feel honoured at your wishing to ally yourself with them. Chesters, though you are of the younger branch, are a fine old family; and the only drawback to your taking your position in the county, viz. poverty, is by the blessing of God now removed. I wish you all happiness, and send you, as a wedding gift, Blair's Sermons, which are the finest I ever read. Should you be in our neighbourhood, I trust you will come and present to me your bride.

Praying always, my dear nephew, for your instant conversion,

'I remain, your affectionate aunt,
'MARIA PUDDICOMBE.'

Sir Wykeham Whiteface's epistle was considerably more brief:

'Whiteface Hall, May 9th.

'DEAR CHESTER,

'Glad to hear you're going to be married. Hope she's a good sort. I have always heard the best account of you, and that you ride capitally to hounds. Strap, of the Carabineers, told us he met you at Rome. We've had capital sport this year; actually killed a May fox. Come down and see us some day. They tell me you've no end of tin now.

'Yours truly, 'W. WHITEFACE.'

Mrs. Strait thoughtfully folded up the two documents. They seemed admirably worded to convey no information whatever. The dowager's note was written on best glazed paper, with coronet and monogram, and gilt

edges; the baronet's on a cheaper quality, of grey paper, but with the address, 'Whiteface Hall,' printed as clear as a pike-staff on the note and the envelope. There was certainly no doubt but that both the letters were genuine, and yet Mrs. Strait felt more than ever puzzled how to decide. A bonâ-fide countess, and a real baronet - here were surely sufficient guarantees of respectability, especially when they wrote hearty and pressing invitations; yet the dowager confessed that she had not seen her nephew for years, and the baronet implied that he had only heard of his doings through a stranger, probably some fast, horsey man, who would be unlikely to prove fastidious on his own account, or in the judgment he passed on others.

Mrs. Strait was really anxious to do her duty by her daughter, even though a kind of weak vacillating obstinacy caused her to seem rather unfeeling. She therefore put both the letters into her writing-desk, locked them up, and determined to say no more on the subject to her daughters until she had again found an opportunity to consult the Vicar.

Dorothy, meanwhile, happily unconscious of

what was passing in her mother's vague mind, calmly attended church, it being a saint's day. Though not superstitiously devout-indeed owning considerable admiration for Dean Stanley's works, and others reputed somewhat too broad for young ladies' reading -she instinctively, with the longing of a troubled soul for a sure refuge in this epoch of weary misery and suspense, felt attracted towards the teachings of Him who has said, 'Come unto Me, and I will give you rest.' Humbly kneeling, in a quiet nook of the halfempty church, with the grave earnest voice of the Vicar sounding in her ears, and his calm strong face before her eyes whenever she chose to draw away her sheltering hands, it seemed to her that Heaven was nearer and more pitying, and that the strength she drew in from her petitions supported her during the ensuing days. Differently constituted from her sister, unable to sing a tune or play a note, yet when the organ poured out its silvery stream of mellow sound or filled the vibrating air with a grand burst of praise, she felt the tones penetrate to the core of her being and thrill her with a sacred fervour. Long and earnestly had she prayed this day, kneeling where the sun-rays threw a golden gleam upon her hair,

slanting across till they lightly touched the priest's white surplice.

Two little children, sleepily blinking in the seats of the mid-aisle which now replaced the unsightly gallery wherein, before Mr. Maynard's advent, they had been penned up, thought they traced a likeness in her to the Saint Elizabeth whose life, with a frontispiece, had been given them as a prize at Christmas, and began to dream of cakes and golden pieces which the saint, it was said, had a habit of impartially distributing.

The sermon to-day had borne a special meaning to Dorothy, the text being taken from Isaiah xl., 'Ye shall not faint and be weary;' and, with the words still fresh in her memory, Dorothy left the church among the stream of straggling worshippers that poured into the dazzling sunlight. The day was so bright and balmy, the hour was still so early, that she determined to make a longer circuit instead of at once returning home. Carrying her prayer-book in her hand, she enjoyed the pleasant air and strolled slowly along. A narrow path led up through a small plantation, across some wheat-fields, and by a green lane back again to the Angel House. This path she took, and sauntered on in soothed content.

When well across the field she became aware that a man was also traversing it in an opposite direction, whose easy swinging gait and slight tall figure too plainly revealed to her that it was Keith. She had never met him in any of her walks since their engagement, and she shrank from meeting him now. The path was so narrow that unless she stooped among the wheat there was no outlet possible: if she turned, it would appear like running away; and while she meditated and debated the question within her mind, he gradually approached and greeted her kindly.

'My little Dorothy, with her prayer-book, looking like a saint from heaven! where are you going to?'

He turned and drew her arm into his.

- 'Now, dear, whatever may be your destination, we will go together.'
- 'Keith,' she said, speaking low, and keeping her eyes bent on the ground, 'I ought not to meet you; my mother has forbidden it.'
- 'But this is only an accidental meeting it does not count; and we should be fools to throw away so excellent an opportunity.'
- 'I am very glad to see you,' she said simply, with a little gush of affection, which caused

him to squeeze her arm tighter. 'I dislike being parted from you dreadfully.'

- 'So do I, my little one; but all will soon be arranged. I have sent the letters to your mother.'
- 'From your relations? She has not told me about it. Are they good?' she added, in a whisper, fearing lest she should even seem to suspect or doubt.
- 'Yes, I think they will serve their purpose. They have not been tormenting you, little one, have they?—you look pale.'
- 'Oh no! no one torments me. I am quite well.' And therewith she flushed up the rosiest red.
- 'You little saint! I believe you would never complain of anything you endured for me.'
- 'Oh! I am not such a saint as you think,' she answered, with a toss of her pretty head.
 - "O Love! no habitant of earth thou art— An unseen seraph, we believe in thee— A faith whose martyrs are the broken heart,"

he repeated softly.

'How well you quote!' she said, with a look of admiring love. 'I often learn poetry by heart, but I have not the gift of remembering it long; and yet I enjoy reading it.'

'It is said that memory is the least of all the mental qualities. However, my acquirements are of a low order. I used to read a great deal of Byron, in a lazy way, floating about in a gondola on the Venice lagoons. Byron is a little out of fashion now, I think; but parts of his poetry are splendid, so full of fire, and passion, and colour. I suppose he has been supplanted by Tennyson as a young lady's favourite.'

'How lovely it must be to float in a gondola and read poetry! The mere idea makes me imagine an enchanted life of which we commonplace country-folk have no conception at all.'

'The life at Venice is a little enchanted, I think,' he said, smiling to himself as he remembered that on that occasion he had not been alone, but in company, a dark-eyed Italian reclining at his side, one deep-red carnation peeping from beneath her lace mantilla, while the twin carnation adorned his button-hole. As they flirted and talked, and spouted poetry, or listened to the gondolier's melodious song, the time had passed quickly, and the poetry learnt under such favourable conditions remained graven in his quick memory. But this was one of the frivolities of the past

which he had decided to keep secret from his future wife; the sacred innocence of a bride's heart must be respected at any cost.

'I will take you to Venice, dear, and you shall taste its peculiar charm yourself one day.'

'Ah, Keith, that would be indeed something to live for, and we could read Ruskin, and Byron, and Symonds together.'

She leant a little more heavily on his arm as she spoke, as though the thought intensified her mental clinging to him. They walked a while in silence, till the sudden twist of the green lane brought them in view of the village. Here they stopped, and he made as though he would detain her; but Dorothy disengaged her arm from his, blew him a coquettish. kiss through the tips of her fingers, and crying brightly, 'I shall soon have good news for you, I hope,' hurried off with happy haste.





CHAPTER XIX.

AN ANONYMOUS LETTER.

HE bright flush of hope and happiness still on her cheeks, and the illumination of love still in her dove-like eyes, Dorothy hastened to seek her mother directly she reached the Angel House.

A pleasant smell of tea and muffins greeted her at the drawing-room door; and within she found Mr. Maynard, who had been closeted with Mrs. Strait, and who was now in the act of departing.

- 'Are you not going to stay a little and talk to me?' Dorothy said brightly; 'you know I heard that excellent sermon of yours this afternoon. What a pity to waste such splendid addresses on a few villagers.'
- 'Miss Dorothy, you were there!' he answered reprovingly. 'If my sermon did good even

to one poor aching heart, it has not been delivered in vain.'

As soon as the door closed upon the clergyman Dorothy went up to her mother's chair, and kneeling down beside her, put her hands over the embroidery at which she worked.

'Mother,' she said, looking up with those calm blue eyes of hers into the troubled faded face, 'have you no news for me—no good news, I mean? Some little bird whispered to me that you had.'

Mrs. Strait started, and shook off her daughter's gentle hands.

'You have met Keith Chester, in spite of my commands: don't deny it! I see you have!'

Pain was written on Dorothy's face. She had risen from her knees, and now stood straight and still, with her hands clasped behind her.

- 'I met Mr. Chester quite by accident,' she said in a low quiet voice; 'and he said he had sent you some letters that were satisfactory, so that I hoped—that is, I thought——'
- 'You thought me a weak fool, who would be flattered by the prospect of a rich marriage for my daughter!'
- 'Mother!' she could not trust herself to say more.

'I have had enough unpleasant things said to me already! There was Mrs. Parkinson, the author of all the disturbance, with her hypocritical assumption of affection for you, pretending she felt like a mother, though her family only consists of two cats. Then Mrs. Maynard, I always distrusted her slippery manner-and, indeed, people say she was only a poor governess when the Vicar met her and fell in love with her, at Bathshe, of course, throws out innuendoes, and says some people prefer money to character though, for her part, no one can accuse her of such a thing, having married a poor clergyman—and that her great friends don't think much of Mr. Chester, and so on. And then Margaret declares she mistrusts the man, and cannot even give a reason for it; after which comes the Vicar himself, with his righteous don't-talk-to-me air. I wonder if it's because. they wear "cossacks" and "canticles," or whatever those new-fangled vestments are called that the clergy now give themselves such airs of superiority? To conclude, I take up the Bible and find a text I can't get out of my head, "It is more difficult for a rich man to enter into heaven than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle." All these things worry

me so, that I declare I wish Mr. Chester had never come here to destroy the peace of this quiet place; while, to crown all, you stand there perversely smiling, and ask if I have not good news for you! It's enough to try a saint!'

'Well, I am not a saint,' Dorothy thus saying remembered that for the second time to-day she had asserted so self-evident a fact, 'and I am not smiling now.' Mother, won't you listen to me?'

Mrs. Strait averted her head, and the urn, as if in derision, began to fizz so wildly that Dorothy was forced to interrupt her speech to extinguish the light.

- 'Why, mother, you have often told me yourself that marriage is such a sacred thing—that you and father, who were poor, were very happy—that people must not lightly undertake •it, but that once they have chosen a partner they must be loving and constant for ever. I can scarcely remember my father, but I am sure he was very good.'
 - 'So he was, very good,' said Mrs. Strait passionately, wiping her eyes; 'and why, oh! why was he ever taken from me? His advice was so excellent, so wise.'
 - 'I know. I know, dear,' and Dorothy ven-

tured now to kneel down again and take her mother's hand. 'Then you can understand me when I say, "As you felt for him, so I feel for Keith." I beg of you to let me be happy in my own way. You know I will never marry against your wishes, you have too kind a mother for me to do heen that; but give me your consent, just the consent of my own dear mammy'-here Dorothy leant her soft velvet cheek against her mother's hand—' and pay no attention to what anyone says. What is the world to us. who have always lived in this little sleepy village? The county don't care about us; we are too poor, too insignificant. Only Lady Darlington sent me a kind word of congratulation, and she, you know, has always been partial to me ever since the first day I met her at Mrs. Maynard's. Mother, you, who are so unworldly, why mind gossip?'

'I am right to mind gossip, child,' Mrs. Strait said, bridling. 'I can't bear my girls to be ill-spoken of.'

'No one can speak ill of me, and Mr. Chester's father lived here all his life. His mother was a good woman. He himself has been honourably employed in diplomacy. His relations have written to congratulate him; he has not

many relations, of course, as he was an only child. Mother, you are a little unreasonable, surely.'

'Mrs. Maynard said I was marrying you to gratify my own ambition.'

- 'But if you are not?' Dorothy, reflecting, perceived that it was not so much the fear of her daughter's future unhappiness as the virtuous dislike to being accused of mercenary ambition that had animated Mrs. Strait's opposition. Why or wherefore Mrs. Maynard should be averse to Dorothy's happiness the latter could only faintly conjecture, the dog in the manger temperament being a complete antithesis to our heroine's own nature, which was quixotic in its good impulses and slow to believe evil.
- 'Dorothy, you are very tiresome; do cease arguing,' said Mrs. Strait irritably. 'I think it quite immodest of you to be so set on marrying a man against the advice of all your friends.'
- 'Mother, you say cruel things. But this I do declare—if I may not marry Keith, I will marry no one else. You know I am not changeable like Margaret, who is infatuated with every agreeable person she meets. I never cared to talk to any man before, and I

am not likely to change now; I have made up my mind.'

It was an unusual proceeding for Dorothy to assert her opinions thus decisively. She generally acquiesced so meekly in whatever arrangements her mother and sister agreed upon, that she represented the burden-bearing portion of the family, the one who would always be pleased, and whose wishes need therefore never be consulted. The sudden fiery spark opposition had kindled made Mrs. Strait pause and look at her critically. Dorothy's breast was heaving, her red lips were firmly pressed together, and with her hands she twisted and untwisted her pockethandkerchief into a thousand creases. other weak persons, Mrs. Strait was as quickly turned from her purpose as she had been drawn into it.

'Of course, I suppose if you are determined and mean to be an undutiful child I cannot prevent it,' she said sulkily. 'Parents nowadays must obey their children.'

'Does that mean that you consent, mother? Oh, let me thank you!' Dorothy, her gentle beauty heightened by a spark of happiness, seized her mother's hand and kissed it fervently.

- 'Don't thank me, child,' her mother said awkwardly, 'for there, I declare I don't know if I am acting for the best. But at any rate, you will have twenty thousand a year and a home; and if my heart is broken, why, that cannot signify.'
- 'Mother, your heart is not to break, and we are all going to be so happy, and you must have a room at Blackness always. What colour would you like the wall? I think pale blue, or red—red is such a warm colour. And we will all love you so——'

Margaret entered in the middle of this tirade, and stared to see Mrs. Strait lying back in her chair pale and exhausted, while Dorothy, gay and flushed, talked to her more merrily and briskly than was her wont.

- 'We are all to be happy,' Dorothy said as she caught sight of her sister, and running up, gave her a great hug.
- 'Who is to be happy? Don't disarrange my collar, for I'm not æsthetic and I don't like to be untidy. Oh, it's settled, is it—and you are to marry Mr. Chester? Well, I always thought mamma would come round. And who is to marry me, I wonder, now?' Margaret spoke with aggravating coldness, and Mrs. Strait, whom Dorothy had infected with some

of her own enthusiasm, immediately relapsed into her former dolefulness.

'Yes; Dorothy insists on being miserable in her own way, so there is nothing more to be said.'

'Of course not. I, at least, am perfectly satisfied,' said Margaret, proceeding leisurely to take off her hat and arrange her glistening black hair. Privately she scarcely agreed with her mother, that to be the wife of a rich man and have numerous carriages and horses at one's disposal, and as many new gowns as the heart of woman could desire, implied being miserable.

At first sight, Mrs. Strait might indeed seem to exhibit an almost sublime amount of indifference to wealth with regard to her daughter's marriage; but we know her motives were of a mixed order—this is always the case where conduct is not founded on principle—they were composed of fear, worldly prudence, and a desire to escape annoyance.

Mrs. Strait, from the aspect of other people's criticisms, inclined to leave the matter alone and dismiss an inconvenient bridegroom. Dorothy, on the contrary, tinged with youthful love and the ardent enthusiasm which suffuses all the future in one rosy glow, felt

that she could not even endure the thought of such a contingency. The happiness of the whole family, being thus tugged asunder by conflicting wishes, reposed on very precarious foundations; for the following morning Dorothy, refreshed by the sleep of a joyous nature at peace with itself, found her mother seated at the matutinal breakfast-table, an open letter spread out on the cloth, and her face disfigured by an expression of helpless terror. Dorothy flew to her side and beheld the object of her consternation. It was an anonymous letter of the vilest and most cowardly description, sarcastically congratulating the recipient on her worldly wisdom, and stating, from the author's own personal knowledge, that Mr. Chester was a knave, a liar, and a rake. denied him honour, integrity or heart, and hinted at all kinds of foul imputations which would be even more likely to rankle in a woman's mind than the plain unvarnished statement of a truth. There was no date, no signature, no clue to the writer; but there the foul thing lay, doing its best to poison the unsuspicious belief of the two women.

Dorothy recovered herself first.

'Mamma, it is anonymous; we must pay no attention to it.' 'And this—this, Dorothy, is what you entail upon me if I permit so hateful a marriage,' said her mother bitterly, looking almost with aversion at the lovely face beside her.

When Margaret appeared, the letter was handed to her for her opinion.

'My own idea is, that creature Joynte wrote it out of spite,' was her remark, when, having read it, she began to chip and open a new-laid egg.

'What is to be done—oh, what is to be done!' sighed Mrs. Strait, who felt that under such circumstances breakfast and worldly comforts were not for her. 'Dorothy will be miserable if she marries.'

'Dorothy will be miserable anyway, it seems; but for my part, I would rather repent in a coach-and-four—you get some compensation for your misery, at least.'

'Advise me—help me, Margaret!' her mother wailed. 'Dorothy, poor child, is of no use, and you are actually able to sit there and eat quite comfortably.'

'My not eating won't make any difference,' answered Margaret calmly, buttering a piece of toast with intelligent care. 'If I am to advise you, I must keep up my strength.'

'If only we had a man—a husband, or brother——'

'The husband happens to coincide with Dorothy's unspoken wish,' Margaret said with a laugh; 'and you won't let her have him. Send for the Vicar; he is a man—though somewhat womanish in his love for Church millinery.'

- 'Margaret! you are really irreverent.'
- 'Am I, mamma? I did not know it was irreverent to talk of Church millinery—now, please, don't fret, dear. Shall I go for Mr. Maynard? I will do anything you like.'
- 'No-let Sarah run; and bring me my red lavender.'

Dorothy, meanwhile, had quitted the room to hide her tears; and her knife and fork lay undisturbed by her plate.

Margaret, noticing this, poured out a cup of tea, and hastily arranging some toast and an egg on a tray, gave it to the maid who answered her summons, and bade her take it to Miss Dorothy.

'Hunger is bad for the complexion,' she said, turning to her mother; 'if Dorothy does not eat, she will lose her beauty, and that will be the worst calamity of all.'

It was really unselfish of Margaret, at this juncture, to take so much care upon herself; for

she hated fuss, and despised people who fell into hysterics and could not control their feelings. She loved only the indolent and sunshiny side of nature, though her easy, perhaps also obtuse good sense invariably suggested to her the most practical mode of administering consolation. A tolerably rough and ready mode, indeed, somewhat on the lines of the homeopathic treatment, which is the law of contraries, but effectual, nevertheless, in curing the real and fancied ailments of sick women.

Smelling-bottles and red lavender soon restored Mrs. Strait to her usual state of comparative good health, while sarcastic allusions, laughter, and a course of downright scolding speedily gave tone to her mind.

Margaret governed her mother capitally, while seeming to let her have her own way; Dorothy, obversely, by her yielding gentleness and low expostulations, as a rule, only increased the obstinacy of Mrs. Strait's character. So that while mere outsiders imagined that Dorothy ruled, because she seemed so quiet and self-possessed, in reality Margaret laughingly held the reins of government, doing as she pleased in quick, petulant, careless fashion, ridiculing her sister for her pertinacious adhesion to the slightest maternal wish, and, as

in the case of this marriage, taking extreme trouble to incite her to overt rebellion.

'Poor Dorothy!' she thought; 'opposition kills her, while I' (and she sniffed the air like a young war-horse) 'simply enjoy the excitement of it.'





CHAPTER XX.

MR. MAYNARD EXHORTS.

HORTLY afterwards, Mr. Maynard arrived. He had been on his way to a rich parishioner, but hearing from Mrs. Strait's little maid, whom

he met on his own doorstep, that her mistress needed him urgently, he promptly obeyed the messenger. Rich or poor, it mattered not to him whence the summons came; as the servant of God, he was at the beck and call of all who were in distress. His grave, kind face, full of that divine light which made it possible to say of him—as Novalis did of Spinoza—he was a God-intoxicated man, calmed and soothed Mrs. Strait at once; and the tears that dropped in his presence grew considerably more peaceful and less bitter.

'My good friend,' he said, taking her hand vol. I. 19

and seating himself beside her, as is the habit both of physicians of the soul and of the body, 'are you in trouble?'

'In great trouble,' she said, sighing. 'See what I received this morning!' She held out for his inspection the anonymous letter which had so scared the inmates of the Angel House. 'Leave me now, dear Margaret,' she added. 'I think I can talk better to the Vicar alone.'

Margaret skipped out of the room lightly enough, for she had spied a fashion-plate in the *Queen*, lent her by Mrs. Maynard, which she was desirous to study at her leisure. Margaret, you see, was not troubled about marriage, and felt it still to be imperative upon her to dress and look her very best.

Half an hour elapsed, and the priest and Mrs. Strait still talked on. Her ill-regulated mind flitted from one aspect of affairs to the other, at one time sighing and lamenting that she had a daughter at all; at another, bewailing her hard fate in being obliged to thwart her child's wishes; anon saying the latter might ruin herself if she pleased—the girl was old enough to judge; then with a sudden swoop round, like the veer of a weather-cock, weeping, and praying the Vicar to reason with her

refractory daughter, who so cruelly disregarded the feelings and the honour of the family.

Mr. Maynard advised, pleaded, and discussed, till at last, for lack of a better suggestion, he proposed to see and talk to Dorothy herself.

'Yes, do. Your words—the words of a gentleman, her vicar and her friend—must carry weight. Do see her at once—and alone!'

Dorothy presently walked in, sad and quiet, with a red rim bordering her eyes and telling of tears shed in secret.

'Here is the Vicar, my dear,' her mother said excitedly; 'he will talk to you—will reason with you. You must listen to him—mind every word he says. Why, you've been crying! I can't think what girls are coming to, spoiling their looks for their sweethearts!'

'Dear child, this is a sad affair,' said the Vicar kindly, when they were alone; his voice bore an especially tender inflection when he addressed children or young people. 'A very sad affair.'

Dorothy stood patiently: her hands crossed before her like a schoolgirl waiting for a scolding.

'Don't stand like that, my dear; sit down here, and tell me what is in your mind.'

He pushed a low chair towards her.

- 'What has mamma been telling you?' she said, as she took it.
- 'She tells me how terribly trying the thought of this marriage is to her; and of the dastardly communication she received this morning.'
- 'Yes the anonymous letter. No one believes that.'
- 'Dorothy, you are a good girl. I know it; for I have noticed you frequently in church lately.'
- 'Ah! but, Mr. Maynard,' she interposed quickly, 'I do not hold all your views. I must tell you honestly I do not come to church because I am good and love God; but, you see, I can pray there more easily—that is to say, I can wish more earnestly; and wishes are prayers, are they not?'
- 'Certainly; good thoughts and good desires come from God, and come to us especially in God's house, and when our minds are full of His goodness and mercy.'
- 'But, Mr. Maynard, I have not got to that stage yet. Mercy is for the unhappy. I am still waiting to be happy.'

'Happiness is to be sought in doing our duty. It is a duty to obey your parents, and not to rebel.'

'But there is a higher duty still, else why does the Bible say, "For this cause doth a man leave his father and mother, and cleave unto his wife"? I have plighted my troth, Mr. Maynard, and that is to me a sacred act.'

Dorothy spoke simply enough, without exaggeration or excitement, clearly and straightforwardly as she felt. In her mind there was no doubt; she did not conceive the possibility of any. She did not feel like a heroine; yet she had no notion of flinching from any severity of trial.

Here plainly was an uncommon case, the Vicar felt, which must be dealt with exceptionally. It was the business of a good priest to study human nature in all its aspects—even to try to understand silly girls.

'My child, happiness is the *ignis fatuus* that misleads us all. It is far more blessed to surrender than to claim every tittle of one's due. I see in you much firmness and enthusiasm, and you possess capacities for great things. Like the needle, which is nevertheless true, you quiver a little before you

point securely to your real pole. You were ravished with the desire of learning a short time ago; now you are ravished with the thought of human love. That will pass too.'

Dorothy blushed at the truth of this attack, and remembered how far her thoughts had strayed already from Stubbs's 'History,' and the Cambridge examination.

'These things are sent to try us; they are phases of our life—temptations destined to lead us on to the one inestimable good—the service of God. Ah, if you would but serve God, Dorothy, with your innocent heart, and your youthful energy, and your gifts of tenderness and devotion, which are worth offering to Him! Did you never hear what Montalembert's little child once said to her father? "It is you who have taught me that withered hearts and weary souls are not the things we ought to offer to God." That little child, as she gave Him her pure life, had already penetrated to the divine core. Dorothy, give your heart to God; and, as an earnest of that gift, please your mother in this matter.'

But Dorothy could stand no more; she broke out passionately:

'Oh, I can't, Mr. Maynard—I can't be

good yet! Let me have a little while of love and happiness. Poets say they are divine things; then why should God grudge us the feelings He has implanted in our nature? I know God is there, waiting for my heart, but I can't give it yet—not just yet. Pity me—lecture me, if you will; but don't try to change my nature. I love mother more than I can say—I will never, never vex her again —I will do anything to please her; but don't ask me to give up Keith.'

Dorothy was sobbing; her pretty hair fell in golden waves over her burning eyes. The Vicar touched her shoulder gently:

'Be calm, child—be calm. Listen: shall I tell you the story of my life? Perhaps it may help you.'

Dorothy nodded acquiescence, and wiped her eyes. Almost any kind of narrative would have been gladly welcomed by her at that instant, as a distraction from her own woes.

'My father was not a parson: he had, indeed, the greatest aversion to my calling. I and my brothers were taught to shoot, hunt, and fish; and think of nothing but sport and games. I was a capital hand at billiards, and very fond of cricket; a good shot, and by no

means a despicable rider. I have now given up every one of these amusements; and yet I assure you, Dorothy, I am happier than I ever was. Spite of difficulties, doubts, and opposition—spite of the grievous want of a classical education, for my father would not even send me to the university lest I should find inducements there for the career I longed to embrace—spite of these things, I eventually became a priest; and I gladly made the sacrifice of all life's fading pleasures to serve Him. It is not hard, Dorothy; on the contrary, it is very easy when once you have taken the plunge, and, tossed on the troubled waters of sorrow and sin, cling boldly to the Rock for refuge.'

'But why need you have given up all those pleasures? surely men may be good, and yet shoot and hunt?'

'Not priests. Their office is so high and holy a one, that they must shun the smallest inclination of the flesh likely to offend others, or lead themselves astray. God's ministers, set apart by Him, living always especially in His presence, and under the sheltering shadow of His face, are not ordinary men. Some maintain that marriage is unfitting. I do not hold that view; but

even in matrimony, though I love my wife very dearly, it was not only my own satisfaction that I thought of, but rather the privilege of rescuing a young woman from a sadly dependent and disagreeable position, and of making her happy.'

'I am sure she ought to be happy,' said Dorothy, fixing her eyes admiringly on the priest's countenance.

'Happiness, as I have said, is relative. Perfect happiness means perfect goodness; and few of us can attain to it here. But we can all strive to do our level best, and tune our souls to the harmony of God's love.'

Dorothy listened silently: the rhythm of Mr. Maynard's powerfully intense voice lulled her pleasantly, but his words only touched her outer senses; her heart rested quietly far from the hum of priestly persuasion. An unswerving conviction in the reality of a truth upheld by the speaker must necessarily carry conviction to the listener; but though Dorothy believed that all that the Vicar said was possible, nay, even desirable for some people, she yet made a mental reservation in favour of herself. Others might love God fervently and overpoweringly; but to her God was a mere vague abstraction, beneficent and omnipotent,

yet not distinctly lovable, even though a blind assent of the will must be rendered to Him.

When the good priest imagined he had convinced her—for, as a rule, people listened to him attentively—he said encouragingly:

'Dorothy, will you decide to give up this struggle for worldly happiness, resign your will to that of God, and do your mother's bidding? You will find peace and joy in this, I promise you.'

To his surprise she answered slowly, and with perfect steadiness:

'I am sorry to grieve my mother, but I cannot give up Keith.'

The priest sighed. How great was the innate depravity of our nature! How hard it was for some people to resign their will simply into God's keeping, a keeping so sure and steadfast! He had not credited Dorothy with such a force of passive resistance. This gentle golden-haired girl, with her meek ways, dared to measure herself against his wisdom and his spiritual fervour.

'Dorothy,' he said, 'my dear child, you will repent this determined stiff-neckedness. God grant you may not suffer, and need to pass through trials innumerable till you are brought to a knowledge of God's love! I

suppose I must tell your mother this decision of yours, but it saddens me deeply. I grieve both for you and for her.'

He rose, and stood drawn to his full height in the straight black garb, that seemed to Dorothy like a harbinger of misfortune, waiting sorrowfully for her to detain him by one word; but she merely put out her hand, and said: 'Thank you, Mr. Maynard; you have been very good to me, but I cannot change my mind.'

He left her then, despairing at that instant of further success, while she continued to sit on the little low chair where he had placed her, motionless, and feeling the stillness a relief; for mad ideas whirled through her head, leaving only the one thought uppermost, 'For Keith—for Keith.'

Margaret found her so when she came in, summoned by the sound of the luncheon-bell.

'Dorothy, how pale you look; and your hand is so cold! Are you ill, child? Do speak—you frighten me!'

'I am not ill,' she answered languidly, lifting her hand to her brow; 'but I think my head aches.'

Then Margaret, prompted by her own decision, took it upon herself to precipitate

matters: so unpleasant a state of things she was determined should not continue. She went to the Vicar, and told him that he must persuade Mrs. Strait to give her consent; she went to her mother, and told her misery was killing Dorothy, and that the child would never give in; she went to Dorothy, and besought her to be patient, and, with her own hands, carried up some chicken and a glass of claret to the wayward girl, who sat at her window like Mariana, looking down the road with wide-open tearless eyes; and Margaret succeeded where everyone else had failed.

One morning she sent for Keith; and, pushing him into the drawing-room on his arrival, she bade him say good-morning to his bride; Margaret meanwhile sitting by her mother in the dining-room, like a watch-dog, till the young man, after a brief and emotional interview, again emerged. Then she brought him herself into her mother's presence, and the two shook hands silently; while with quivering lips and watery eyes the widow accepted his pretensions to her daughter's hand.

'Send for the lawyer soon; the more quickly you are married the better,' whispered Margaret to him in the hall, as they exchanged farewells. 'This house won't be particularly pleasant for any of us till you have taken your bride away.'

Keith promised to agree to all her suggestions, vowing that he would settle splendid pin-money on his intended.

- 'And don't forget me!' added Margaret, with a smile; 'I have been your best friend. We shall not indulge in any fuss of bridesmaids and that sort of thing; I shall come with my sister as her attendant. You are marrying into a poor family, you know—genteel poverty and all its accessories, pride and narrow-mindedness; but I am not one of that sort. You may give me as handsome a present as you like—a pearl daisy with diamond leaves would not be inappropriate.'
- 'You shall choose what you like, sister-inlaw mine, and general privy-councillor,' he answered: 'your kindness and cleverness cannot be too highly rewarded;' saying which he lifted his hat courteously, smiled, and bounded down the steps.
- 'One fellow-creature happy, at least,' said Margaret to herself, as she carefully shut the door after him. 'Now for the others. I don't know myself in this new part of the kind Samaritan. Let's see, which needs me most—mamma or Dorothy? Oh, I think mamma,

poor dear! she'll be having hysterics or a faint next! I am so glad I have a capital digestion, and no nerves.'

'Well, mamma, it's all over, and most successfully I should say,' said Margaret, reentering, to Mrs. Strait, who sat in her armchair staring gloomily before her, with her knitting lying unnoticed in her lap. 'Now, do talk! Isn't he good-looking, just? I never noticed his beauty before so distinctly.'

'Yes, it's all over, and your doing, Margaret!' said Mrs. Strait ruefully; 'and a pretty kettle of fish it will all be!'

'Mamma, the wedding must be soon: shall we say in a fortnight—May 28th? We must see to all the arrangements. Will you have a luncheon here?'

'Listen to me, Margaret;' Mrs. Strait roused herself to speak with some decision. 'I have been forced to consent to this marriage, and of course I will accompany my daughter to church, but more I absolutely refuse to do! I'll have no breakfast, no rejoicings, no calling together of friends! People may accuse me of stinginess; they are welcome to do so. I know that little vixen, Mrs. Maynard, will say unpleasant things; but, remember, I am firm on this point—there must be no merry-

making. Dorothy will walk to church in her bonnet and be married, and then I wash my hands of her. I'll see her made an honest respectable wife, but that is all I will do!'

'Very well, mother. It shall be as you wish.'

Mrs. Strait had expected violent opposition. Girls, she knew, loved the ceremony of a wedding, and she thought by her commands to thwart and punish Dorothy, and publicly express her displeasure at the marriage, thus leaving herself a loophole for future conduct, whatever the result—of distinct disapproval if Keith were really worthless, or of condescending forgiveness should her previsions not be realized.

Margaret's calmness considerably discomfited her; so she said no more, and lay pettishly back in her chair, with her eyes shut.

Margaret looked at her for a minute or two, then, noiselessly departing, proceeded to mount the stairs to her sister's bedroom. She found Dorothy, as on other occasions, sitting at the window, a volume of the 'Imitation' in her lap. Her face was transfigured with happiness.

'Well, Dorothy, are you glad?'

'Glad!' She put her arms round her sister's neck, and hugged her in affectionate silence.

'Margaret, how good you have been to me! I was just thinking how sad everything seemed only yesterday, and now to-day, as by magic, all is changed. I felt as if I could not be grateful enough to God; and I remembered that Mr. Maynard had said I ought to give up my own will, and not try for happiness; but still, you see, after all, the happiness has come to me. So I read a little in the "Imitation," about resignation and all that. Listen.'

Dorothy read these words in her sweet clear voice:

- "Son, it behoves thee still to learn many things, which thou hast not yet well learned.
 - "What are these, Lord?
- "That thou conform in all things thy desire to My good pleasure; and that thou be not a lover of thyself, but earnestly zealous that My Will may be done."
- 'I cannot feel that, Margaret; my whole heart just seems to be singing out for joy.'
- 'Since you left off your books of study, Dorothy, it appears to me you are rapidly becoming a mystic.'
- 'What were the doctrines of the mystics, dear?'

Dorothy put the book down, and slid her arm affectionately round her sister's slim waist.

- 'I don't know myself, exactly; but I believe it is a term of opprobrium applied to all religious people whose sayings are difficult to understand.'
- 'Everything that is lovely in one's life seems difficult to understand. Perhaps the mystics were right.'
- 'Perhaps—except when they wore hair-shirts and avoided cleanliness.'

The two sisters prattled on gaily, in far greater freedom and unanimity than they had enjoyed for many a day. A load was lifted from Dorothy's heart; duty and pleasure had become once more synonymous, and the vision of a noble, harmonious life, with perhaps little self-denial in it owing to the fact of love being the domestic ruler, yet containing a number of agreeable responsibilities, spread itself out before her raptured imagination. Margaret had less imagination, but she also could realize the pleasant facts of pearl brooches and an amiable generous brother-in-law, under decided obligations to herself, and consequently morally bound to civility and consideration for her wishes.



CHAPTER XXI.

MARRIAGE SETTLEMENTS.

R. CHESTER, on being duly informed of Mrs. Strait's decision with regard to the marriage, made no objection. Under the circum-

stances, he said he should invite no friends but the two who were staying with him. Perhaps in his own heart he was not sorry to be dispensed from the trouble of entertaining such strangers as Lady Puddicombe and Sir Wykeham Whiteface—who must in their respective capacities have proved very unwelcome guests.

'How good of Keith!' said Dorothy, when she heard that he had quietly acquiesced in her mother's somewhat tyrannical commands.

'You find everything admirable in that individual,' Margaret answered coolly. 'Of course all men hate the trouble and fuss of a wedding, and are only too glad to be saved

from it. Women like the marriage festivities, but men only tolerate them because they are the price they must pay for their wives.'

Dorothy did not answer, but she realized even more profoundly the rapture of belonging to one who was evidently raised above the petty and conventional interests of the world. Personally, she attached no importance to fine clothes, or jewels, or an admiring crowd, and therefore was considerably relieved to find that it was ordained for her to walk quietly to church with her mother and sister.

There was, indeed, no meanness in Mr. Chester's composition. His lawyer appeared at the Angel House without delay, armed with all manner of generous suggestions—one of which was the settlement of £500 a year pin-money upon his intended.

'It is far, far too much!' Dorothy, seized with positive fright, waved her hand as though to dismiss all further mention of such munificence. 'What should I do with all that money?'

'Mr. Chester,' said the lawyer pompously, 'wishes his future wife to have such a provision made for her, as will enable her to dress and live according to her station. These were his express desires.'

Margaret and Mrs. Strait looked at one

another. This, then, was the man whom they were letting into their family under protest, through a kind of moral back-door. Evidently he meant to do his best to create a good impression.

The lawyer, who had come from London with the settlements ready for signature, and who was a brisk little man with sandy hair, looked at his watch, and hoped the ladies would soon make up their minds, as he must catch the five p.m. express, and was previously desired to call on Mr. Chester. So the ladies, notwith-standing Dorothy's passive opposition, made up their minds that such splendid offers were not to be despised; indeed, their own lawyer, who sat by, had several times hummed and hawed, and lifted his eyebrows with astonishment.

When the legal formalities were concluded, and the men of business had taken their departure, Dorothy, oppressed with the sense of her future magnificence, ran upstairs to put on her hat and go for a walk. At that instant a loud ring at the front-door echoed through the house, promptly followed by the maid's announcement of Lady Darlington's presence in the drawing-room. She was the lady who, it may be remembered, had written Dorothy a

kind letter of congratulation, and who had invariably, during their slight acquaintance, shown her exceptional favour.

Lady Darlington was a great lady; but she was also a good woman, and a happy She loved seeing others happy, and she adored beauty — two excellent reasons feeling attracted towards Dorothy, who was the loveliest girl of her acquaintance, and who was on the verge of a good marriage. unpleasant rumours concerning Mr. Chester had not reached Lady Darlington's ears; nor, indeed, had they done so, would she have paid much attention to them. She prided herself on her own judgment, and would accept none at second-hand regarding the people she liked; as for the others, they simply had no place in her thoughts. She was standing now in the middle of the green drawing-room, an utterly incongruous nineteenth-century figure, among the faded chintzes and old china and delicate carving, dressed in a sangde-bæuf costume of velvet and cloth, made in the latest Parisian mode, and completed by a dainty little velvet hat, poised jauntily on her She was impatiently tapping her parasol against her skirts as she waited, looking like a fragment of Dresden china, with her

sunny hair, her upturned impertinent nose, and her red and white complexion.

'Ah, there you are, dear!' she said affectionately, as Dorothy appeared. 'I came to have a good long talk with you. I have sent away the ponies and the coachman to the public-house, so they will be quite happy. You have nothing to do, have you? You can spare me quite a long half-hour?'

'Oh yes!' said Dorothy eagerly, making room for her friend on the sofa, and taking her place beside her.

The seat was the same that she and Keith had generally occupied during their lovers' talks; and it seemed to her that his presence still lingered and hovered around.

'Let's look at you!' Lady Darlington cried. Her brisk, clear voice was full of energy and life; filled, as are the voices of so few people, neither with regret, nor pain, nor bitterness. It was a voice that held no story—not even a hope or a memory, but only the living fact of perfect contentment. 'Let's look at you! How lucky that Mr. Chester is, I declare! you are such a dear, pretty little thing! I was so glad when I heard the good news. You got my letter of congratulation?—that's all right. And now tell me all about it.

Where did you meet him? how long have you known him? when are you to be married? and are you going to have a grand wedding? Buffie said I was not to ask you all these questions, as you would think them impertinent; but I know better. Girls like to tell the whole of their affairs to their friends, don't they?'

Lady Darlington patted Dorothy's hand amiably between her two palms, and looked so kindly interested, that, overcome by the varied phases of emotion through which she had been lately passing, Dorothy laid her head on her friend's shoulder, and sobbed.

'Nonsense! Dorothy, my dear, what is the matter? Are you unhappy? don't you like him? Please don't cry; it makes me miserable.'

The loving words sorely tested Dorothy's composure; for, during the last fortnight, almost everyone had scolded, lectured, or reproved her. Though Mrs. Strait had reluctantly yielded her consent, she yet lost no opportunity of impressing upon her that she was in disgrace. Girls who married in spite of their parents' wishes could not be otherwise than in disgrace; so that tormented, anxious, trembling even as with a sense of

guilt at the prospect of her dawning happiness, she felt an indescribable amount of expansion in the genial atmosphere of Lady Darlington's hearty and loving sympathy.

The little woman's influence was so bracing: she inspired one with such a healthy view of life, in which duties seemed so simple and plain, everybody, including herself, so kind and straightforward, happiness so easy of acquirement, that the sanguine nature of the girl beside her revived, as drooping flowers lift their heads after a shower of rain, until she soon laughed as brightly and joyfully as the most orthodox of brides.

'And so they said nasty things of your intended, did they?' Lady Darlington observed, in a half-mocking, half-tender tone. 'Never mind, dear; if only you love him—that is the great thing. I never realized what happiness was till I married Darlington; and my two little girls—Hetty and Letty—and, best of all, Baby John, were born. You know how fond they are of you? I laughed so much, and was so happy, the first years of my marriage, that the very babies chuckled instead of crying, as most babies do. Make your husband happy, Dorothy—that is the

great thing. Men do love comfort—no scenes, no reproaches. See that he has what he likes for dinner; never contradict him, and never let him learn to do without you. Buffie and I used to go everywhere together at first; and when the babies came, and I couldn't knock about so much, he became more and more domestic—that is to say, he never slept away from home. What are Mr. Chester's tastes?'

'I scarcely know,' said Dorothy hesitatingly, thinking how strangely maternal was the influence of this bright young woman upon her; and wondering why, in the reverse case of her own mother, the guiding and helping seemed to be shifted to the child. 'I scarcely know. He likes living abroad; though he says that if I care for it, we may make our home at Blackness; but, just at first, we are to travel. He has a palace at Venice, you know; and we are to go there for our honeymoon. It is really kindness on his part; for he knows I long to travel.'

'I see; he is going to begin the spoiling at once!'

'Oh no!'—the flush deepened a little on Dorothy's cheek — 'only the loving; for I shall spoil him too!'

- 'I see you think that it will counteract the effect of the spoiling if it is mutual.'
- 'Lady Darlington!' broke out the girl passionately, gently stroking the velvet and silk sleeve of her visitor as she spoke, 'is it possible to love too much? You see, I love Keith so that I can't even realize it; my heart seems to stand quite still sometimes when I think of all he is to me, and of the wonderful treasures life seems to hold for me now. past has become blotted out: all my childhood, and Margaret's teasing, and even my longing for books. The future is before me, like a blurred golden haze round the setting sun, into which you cannot look without being dazzled. And the present only, this feeling for Keith, my gratitude to him for loving me, my worship of the sound of his very footstep, my sometimes awful dread lest he should be taken from me—these things are all I seem conscious of. Is love always like this?'
- 'No'—Lady Darlington looked as grave and thoughtful as her piquant features and dimpled mouth permitted—'love is not always like this. I think you are too highly strung, Dorothy; I suppose that comes of having lived so long in a dull country home. You ought to think more of your dress, and your

wedding, and your presents, and less of your own feelings-believe me, that is a mistake. Think how rich you will be, and how much you can enjoy yourself-by-the-bye, have you engaged a maid yet?—and don't trouble to fuss yourself as to whether anything is likely to happen to Mr. Chester. Why, when Darlington goes out hunting I never fret myself into a fever, but I order tea and poached eggs for him on his return, and take care that there is a fire in his dressing-room; these are the ways in which a woman can show her love, and which husbands truly appreciate. Once, I remember, I did get a little frightened. Darlington stayed out so late—it was past nine o'clock—the fox had run right away into the neighbouring county; and, feeling utterly miserable, I sent out men and lanterns to look for him. When he arrived, covered with mud and looking so tired, and his horse as if it could scarcely stand, I flew down to the door and fell into his arms in hysterics, while all the servants stood by. Just think! did scold me! and he said I was never to be frightened or send out for him again, and I never But then I was very young, and could not really understand things in those days.'

Dorothy sighed. Love seemed to have as

many phases as there are gradations of colour in the solar spectrum. Lady Darlington herself, after all, could not understand it.

'You have not sent me an invitation to the wedding yet,' Lady Darlington resumed; 'but I have brought you my present. Do you like it? I hope so.'

She pulled from her pocket, after some considerable tugging—for modern skirts seem specially designed to be inconvenient for almost all the purposes for which they are required—a small velvet case, and handed it to Dorothy, who quickly opened it.

'A plain gold-band bracelet; just what I have always longed for! Oh, thank you, dear Lady Darlington!' Dorothy hugged her friend affectionately. 'I did so wish for a bracelet I could wear every day, and that would not be too grand or too smart for ordinary use.'

'That is why I thought of this.'

Lady Darlington unfastened the clasp, and closed it with a snap round the white wrist held up towards her.

'You will be sure to have all kinds of lovely jewels given you by your intended, but this one you can always wear; and when you wear it, think of me.'

- 'I shall not fail to do so,' said Dorothy, looking fondly at her bracelet.
 - 'And what has he given you?'
 - 'This.'

Dorothy showed a large sapphire ring. The stone was simply let into a broad gold setting; but the colour of the gem, as it flashed in the sunlight, was exquisite. She did not add that he had said, as he slid it on her finger, 'Let the dark-blue of this stone mean to you the depth of my true love,' words which she had repeated to herself ever since, each evening as she lay down in bed, kissing the smooth round ring, and stroking it lovingly as though it were some sentient creature.

- 'A very pretty ring. I suppose he is reserving the sentimental trio, with their charming meaning—the ruby, diamond, and emerald hoops—for your marriage day? Every one gets those. And have you had other presents?'
- 'Lady Puddicombe sent me a Bible, and Sir Wykeham Whiteface a hunting-crop—they are his relations, you know—and Margaret gave me a writing-desk, and Mrs. Parkinson an inlaid ivory box—I imagine her Indian protégé sent it her,' she added, smiling; 'and

—and I think that is all. You know, dear Lady Darlington, we have told no one about the marriage. Nobody in the county cares much for us; we have only just a few intimate friends. And it is all to be quite private—mamma will not ask anyone; and I am to be married in a bonnet.'

'Poor darling—how cruel!' said the other lady, with an expressive shudder. 'Oh, you must really have a veil; you must insist upon it! It is like a widow to be married in a bonnet. Insist now, mind!'

'I really don't care; I can wear a veil with my bonnet, you know.'

'Oh, but that is not at all the same thing; and then in the month of May, too! Do you know that May marriages are unlucky?'

'Oh, Lady Darlington, I am not superstitious! Please don't tell mamma, or she would perhaps put off the wedding; and then that would cause even more trouble.'

'Trust me; I will say nothing. And am I really not to see you married? I am so sorry, dear; but do remember what I said about making men comfortable—that is the chief thing. Study their food—they have such queer stomachs, you know; and their tempers are affected by what they eat. I must really

go now; I had not a conception it was so late. Please ring, dear, for my carriage—if I stay too long, Green will drink so many glasses of beer that he will never see to drive me home; coachmen are such a trouble—I suppose you will have a pony-carriage? I really advise you to make your coachman take the pledge. I wish I could persuade Green; but he is so old and obstinate.'

Lady Darlington rose as she spoke, and now proceeded slowly to button her long Swedish kid gloves.

'Shall you be presented at the next Drawing-room? Because if I can be of any use, you know I shall be delighted; or perhaps Lady Puddicombe, your husband's relation, will present you. That is the more usual thing, perhaps.'

'Oh no; I shall not be presented; we shall travel abroad. Thank you again, dear Lady Darlington; please kiss me once before you go.'

'Good-bye, my dear,' said the great lady, pressing her lips on Dorothy's fair forehead; 'good-bye. I hope you will be very happy.'

When Lord and Lady Darlington sat opposite each other at dinner that evening, in the bright candlelight oasis of a dark oak dining-

room, he said to his wife, while he carefully helped her to fish:

'Did you see your little friend? and what is your opinion of the marriage?'

'Oh, Buffie, it all seems so strange,' said his wife. 'She is marrying in a kind of disgrace, so uncomfortably; she is only to wear a bonnet—not even to be dressed as a bride and the wedding takes place in May. Did you ever hear of such a set of ill-omened circumstances?'

'As long as they are married, I don't suppose the bonnet matters. I should not have cared if you had worn bombazine on our wedding-day, Nina.'

'Oh, but that is different,' she said, reddening with pleasure at his hearty words; 'besides, of course no one could compare with you!'





CHAPTER XXII.

THE WEDDING DAY.



T was the eve of Dorothy's weddingday, and she stood meditating in her own chamber. All the vexatious business details were com-

pleted; the boxes containing her small wardrobe stood packed in the corner. She had
permitted no extravagances, remembering her
mother's slender income; the wedding-gown
lay ready on a chair, covered with its plain
tulle veil—for Mrs. Strait had relaxed about
the bonnet at the last moment—and Margaret
had just left her with a kiss and the words,
'Now go to sleep, dear, and have a good night.'

But Dorothy could not sleep. She had robed herself in her pale blue dressing-gown, and removed all the pins that confined her beautiful fair hair, leaving it to tumble in

vol. i. 21

waves down her back. She had read a chapter of the 'Imitation,' and she had prayed by her bedside as well as she could, spite of the buzzing thoughts and roaming fancies which danced in her head the while.

Keith had passed the afternoon with her: his manner seemed to her somewhat more excitable than usual, and vet, as it were. tinged with a new touch of humility. He had kissed her hands passionately, and he had said: 'Dorothy, I am not good enough for you-not half good enough;' and she had put her arms round his neck and whispered in his ear: 'I love you just as you are.' And they had parted a little more solemnly, a little more silently than usual, he beginning a sentence with, 'Oh, how dear you are to me!' and then breaking off sharply, and gazing at her with a kind of passion; and she feeling near to tears, and not knowing any reason for it; and then, instead of 'Good-bye,' he had said 'To-morrow,' and she had turned with a blush into the house.

All this she remembered now as she stood there in front of her looking-glass, the pale blue garments clinging to her, and outlining the youthful curves of her figure, and the long shiny hair shrouding her face like a golden cloud. It was very natural, to be sure, she thought, that they should have been both of them a trifle confused, sad, and silent on this day, the eve of their wedding.

Dorothy smiled a little to herself, and threw open her window; the bright May moon lavishly silvered the little garden with its rays, touching the stiff-standing rows of tulips, and the sweet yellow blossoms of the azaleas and slender white narcissus; the streaks of light broadening as they spread over the meadows, and far away to the clear grey-blue sky. To-morrow this same moon would look down again upon her, but she would see it under another aspect, as mistress of Blackness. She would not be alone then, perhaps, but feel a strong arm round her waist and the touch of a kiss on her hair.

If only she had not been oppressed with a horrid sense of guilt and of ingratitude in leaving her mother thus defiantly, as it were, and against her will! Mrs. Strait on this, the last night of Dorothy's girl-life, kissed her quietly and coldly on her brow, and said, 'Good-night, Dorothy'—nothing more. She must have known no child could sleep thus, conscious of deserving forgiveness, and receiving none. If even now, at this late hour,

Dorothy might fling herself on her mother's breast and ask for a blessing. Why not? The night was far advanced certainly; one o'clock had struck by the old Dutch clock. But Mrs. Strait's slumbers were light; she often lay wakeful for hours. Dorothy would not disturb her, but just steal into her room, and if she were not sleeping speak to her.

The impulse became irresistible. She took her candle in her hand, and opened her door. The passage was perfectly dark and silent; the old oak panelling absorbed the small flicker of the candle, and wore an increased aspect of gloom and magnitude. She could hear the big Dutch clock ticking at the foot of the stairs, and the creak of the chains that bore the weights.

She stood for a moment thinking; it was necessary for her to pass Margaret's door, Mrs. Strait's being the corner room at the end of the landing; so, taking courage, she slid past noiselessly with a guilty feeling, lest she should alarm her sister. Directly she pushed open the door of her mother's chamber she perceived that her premises were correct; Mrs. Strait was awake, for her head moved on the pillow.

^{&#}x27;What is it, Dorothy?'

^{&#}x27;Oh, mamma!' — the girl set down her candle on the nearest table, and hurried to

the bedside—'Oh, mamma, I have come to ask you to forgive me. You said nothing to-night, and to-morrow I am to be married—and—I could not bear it.'

'Indeed!' Mrs. Strait's tone was depressingly cold.

'Won't you give me your blessing, and say a kind word to me?'

Dorothy knelt down, and laid her head by her mother's on the pillow. Mrs. Strait edged away a little impatiently.

'You ought to be sleeping, Dorothy, at this hour. Your eyes will be red to-morrow.'

'I do not care. I care for nothing but your blessing now. Mother, bless me!'

'You are quite ridiculous, child! What do you want? You have pushed through this affair by the aid of your own obstinacy, and now, just when you are on the verge of victory, you pretend to desire my sanction.'

'I don't pretend,' Dorothy said softly.

'You should have thought of it all before.'

There was no sign of relenting in Mrs. Strait's tone; it was hard, incisive, and deliberate. Dorothy twisted her arms above her head, and threw it back despairingly.

'Mother, it is so shocking for us not to part friends. Do give me your blessing.'

'That is just like you, Dorothy,' her mother

said with a whine; 'always wanting something at unreasonable hours, and worrying me with fine feelings and sentimentality. Your poor father was just the same, never could eat his dinner in peace if he thought he had offended me. I hope you will become more rational. Get me my sleeping-draught, please.'

Mrs. Strait, with half-closed eyes, watched her daughter as she glided across the room and poured out the draught with shaking hand, and noticed how sad and pale she looked.

'Go to bed, now, child,' she said, 'when Dorothy handed her the glass. 'Go and sleep.'

'Say one kind word, mother, and I will go.'

'What can I say? I can't make fine speeches in the middle of the night, of course. I hope you will be happy.'

'Is that all?' Dorothy still lingered, tenderly smoothing the bedclothes.

'What else can I say? Do go to bed, dear, and try not to take to late hours when you are married; they ruin the complexion. And now, once more, good-night. I do not intend to speak another word.'

Mrs. Strait turned round on her pillow, and deliberately closed her eyes.

'Good-night, mother; God bless you!'
Dorothy kissed her mother, and slowly

withdrew from the bed. In her own room the shutters stood wide open, precisely as she had left them; the moonlight streamed in. mixing its blue rays with the yellow candlelight, bringing into relief the snowy bed, gleaming upon the wedding costume spread carefully over the back of a chair, glancing off the sharp polished edges of the furniture. Dorothy restored the candle to its place by the looking-glass, and dropped into a seat. This, then, was her farewell to the closed pages of her maiden life. How freezing and lonely it was! The pale moonlight seemed to mock her with its pearly coldness, and to fill her with a kind of unreasoning dread. She shut the window and pulled down the blind. It was warmer and more cosy so. But the silence still oppressed her. It was soon broken by the whirr of a moth's wings trying to scorch itself in the candle. The weird thing buzzed round her as she faintly tried to catch it and save the poor insect's life. Its wings brushed against her face; she shuddered a little. Presently she covered her face with her hands, and, her nerves now utterly unstrung, began to sob.

The wedding-day rose calm and clear; the air was fresh, and the sunshine unexpectedly

brilliant. The church bells rang out gaily, and the villagers crowded round, standing in the road and among the graves, moved by laudable curiosity to see Miss Dorothy married. The old crones especially, to whom such an event is always interesting, had early taken good places. First of all they indulged themselves with a good stare at the bridegroom, who drove up in a dogcart with his two friends.

'A one-'orse trap! 'tain't much of a thing; and for a squire, too, who they do say has a big fortin. My boy Jim, who works in the garden, says he's uncommon open-handed.'

'P'r'aps he do it out of bluster-like; there's some as does that—wears bad clothes and keeps their money in a chest.'

'There's the bride!' The old women pressed close together and peeped over one another's heads, as the beadle waved them back to make a path for the procession. 'Oh, my, ain't she a dear! She's got a carriage at least; and that's her ma, the old lady in lavender silk, and her sister in white—bless her heart!'

'Why, sure you've seen her often enough before!'

'She's been in and out of the village all her life—one of ourselves, as it were. Clothes don't change you that much.'

'They make a difference, though; she is a pretty creature, bless her heart!'

The bride had meanwhile moved on, and was lost to view inside the church. The edifice itself was closely packed with spectators. Mrs. Parkinson and Mrs. Maynard occupied front seats. From every available pew eager faces strained and bent, like swaying cattle in a truck, endeavouring to catch the smallest glimpse of the interesting ceremony.

Dorothy stood on the marble altar steps, very white and perfectly still except for the gentle flutter of her veil, which revealed the beating of her heart. The night's vigil and emotion had somewhat exhausted her, but factitious excitement lent her strength, and she was unaware of the many lynx-eyed mortals critically regarding her. As the central figure they scrutinized her appearance unreservedly, from the natural spray of orange-flower in her hair, culled by Keith's express orders that same morning in the orangery at Blackness, to the wide hem of her plain white satin dress. But she was distinctly conscious of Keith's proximity. was permeated with a sense of joy in the knowledge that he stood beside her, that he held her cold quivering hand in his firm grasp, and pressed a small gold band possessively

upon her finger. Suddenly she seemed to understand that the clergyman was saying in an impressive voice, 'I pronounce that they be man and wife together.' As these solemn words fell on her ears, she stole a furtive glance at Keith, seeking to measure his impressions by her own, but his countenance remained impassive, though he bit nervously at his moustache. Then a new and terribly real conception of the inevitable seized upon her; she felt as though she must rotest, scream out. And all the time, with the sting of the irrevocable—a word that transcends the most infinite conception of a finite creature -came the delirious sensation of perfect selfsurrender, for life, for ever!

A little later they were standing together alone in the corner of the green drawing-room, by the window. Keith held both her hands.

'My wife!' he said; 'my property now!'

Dorothy threw back her veil with a sudden movement, lifted her face, white and pure like a snowdrop on its stalk, to his, stole her arms round his neck, and said,

'Oh Keith, my beloved, be kind to me!'

END OF VOL. I.

